

A still life composition featuring a vase of tulips, a ceramic jar, and a glass of wine on a decorative tray. The tulips include a prominent red and white one and a white one. The ceramic jar has the text "BIBREINSA FABER" and "FRUTTO E SOSPINO" on it. The glass is filled with a light-colored wine. The tray is ornate with a repeating scroll pattern.

A vampire, a ghost, and
a fairy walk into a bar...

Welcome to Jessie's

By Eli Rainwater

Welcome to Jessie's

Jessie's Bar, Volume 1

Eli Rainwater

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For Chass, who wanted to be the first to read this. I know you read it over my shoulder the whole time.

This was a labor of love that desperately needed to come out into the open, and I couldn't have done it without my friends and support system. Well, I *could* have. It just would have been a lot harder.

Thank you Dave and Erin for all the editorial feedback, Alicia for keeping me caffeinated and fed and keeping the cats distracted so I could write, and thank you most of all to Brenda for being the most amazing person I know and for letting me shamelessly use you as inspiration for Jessie.

Chapter 1

“NO ONE WILL EVER LOVE me again. I shall die alone with naught to mourn my passing.”

Jessie MacCaverty stopped wiping down the bar top to raise an eyebrow at the chestnut curls belonging to the adorable and devastatingly handsome yet extremely annoying, melodramatic vampire who flounced through the door in a swirl of early autumn air and leaves before dramatically collapsing on a stool in front of her. Her bartender and apprentice Caroline rolled her blue eyes before going back to pouring beers for the amused regulars at the other end of the bar.

“Get your head off the bar. I just wiped that spot,” Jessie tucked a long, silver-gray curl behind her ear, completely unsympathetic to her friend's plight, whatever it was *this* time.

Nicodemus shot up on the stool, outrage and wounded betrayal reflected in his honey gold almond shaped eyes. The younger of two vampiric siblings, he was as beautiful in death as he had been in life as a long dead king's military advisor and member of a noble family.

“You! You who are supposed to be the one I hold most dear, the most treasured of my bosom companions, have you no mercy on my poor soul? My wounded heart?”

“Not when you start talking like the bastard child of a Hallmark card and Harlequin romance, I don't.” Jessie was extremely unimpressed—and unsympathetic.

“So be it,” he huffed, slumping back down to prop his elbows on the oak bar top that had been lovingly polished over the decades until it gleamed forever. “Take away my poet's soul. See if I care.”

Jessie beamed. “See, isn't that better? Now, do you want a drink while you calmly and sensibly tell me what's going on without all the histrionics?”

He scowled before relenting. “Fine. But none of those weird, fruity, sweet things the kids are drinking everywhere! Those colors should never have been put into anything consumable,” he shuddered in disgust.

“Caroline, make him a Manhattan, will you?” Jessie called over her shoulder.

“Sure thing, boss,” Caroline replied cheerfully, tossing her long, blonde, curly ponytail over her shoulder as she deftly flipped a martini glass over and grabbed the bottle of rye.

“You really lucked out with her,” Nicky commented as Jessie poured a glass of sweet tea and came around the bar to grab the stool next to him. She had to agree.

Caroline was a brilliant and highly motivated young woman whose witching powers would probably rival Jessie's own. When she decided to seek Jessie out for training, she showed up at Jessie's bar every day for two weeks until Jessie relented.

Jessie is a witch. Not just any witch, mind you; she's the strongest, oldest, and best known in the state of Georgia and one of the most talented in the world. It had been years since she took on an apprentice. She didn't have anything against it—she just liked the semi-retirement of being able to run her little bar and stand in for matters involving the supernatural community when they arose while helping her neighbors when they needed help without any complications.

Caroline, and then Jared after her, had not been in her ten year plan, and now she wouldn't give them up for anything.

Nicky studied Jessie as she settled down next to him. She was tiny. Long gray curls framed a slightly oval shaped face, high cheekbones, and huge, piercing blue eyes. She lived for broken in jeans and obscure band or bar t-shirts that were so soft and well worn, they were one stitch away from falling apart. Like all witches, she stopped aging in her mid forties and was eternally in that stage of beauty when the laugh lines enhanced the late summer glow of youth.

“Now. What happened this time?” she asked, settling in for the long haul.

He heaved a melancholy sigh that sounded like it came from his toes. She resisted the urge to follow Caroline's eye-rolling example.

“I thought I met the one. He was so perfect. The gargoyle of my dreams!” Jessie choked on her tea.

“I'm sorry, the *what* of your dreams?”

He looked affronted. “Gargoyle! I told you about him last week!”

Jessie barely managed to hide a guilty look. To be fair, when he started on the love interest *du jour*, it could get a little... repetitive. It wasn't her fault if it was easier to tune him out and concentrate on inventory. Bits and pieces of his hours-long recitations of adoration started to come back to her.

“Oh, right! *That* gargoyle!”

Jared, Jessie's other apprentice and barback, a tall, young Black man with skin the color of dark chocolate and a fade he was very proud of and who had lined up a promising career in role playing game production, stopped with the ice bucket in midair to stare at Nicky.

“Dude! How does that even *work*?” He demanded, fascinated. Jessie heaved an internal sigh of relief because she really wondered the same thing and couldn't figure out how to ask without exposing herself as a confidante fraud.

“Well, if you *must* know,” Nicky drew himself up haughtily, “Gargoyles are only stone by day when they revert to their... less attractive but more widely known visages.”

“So, what, at night they're hot?” Sometimes talking to Jared was like talking to the blunt side of a hammer and about as subtle.

“If you must put it that way, yes, they can be. Are. Usually are.” Nicky would have blushed if blood pumped through his veins. Jessie realized that he hadn't fed recently. He must really be enamored with this guy.

“Did he ghost you?” Caroline asked with a sympathetic glance.

“No offense, Charlie!”

“None taken.” Charlie was the bar's resident ghost. When Mary Jo Sutton, who was still the town's most beautiful and seductive succubus at the age of fifty, had propositioned him in the bathroom, he had neglected to mention that he had a heart condition. He swore the resulting heart attack was worth it. She still felt guilty about the whole thing.

“Ghost me? Ghost *me??*” Nicky was stunned, floored, flabbergasted that anyone could even consider such a thing. Jessie

gave in to the urge to roll her eyes. Trying to hold back was becoming exhausting.

“Focus!” she slapped her hand on the bar harder than she planned and instantly regretted it. “Where were you supposed to meet?”

“Well, here, tonight actually. I wanted him to meet you.”

Jessie blinked at him.

“So you're telling me that you just waltzed in here and immediately went into hysterics without even bothering to see if he was here first? I mean, we're not exactly balls to the walls over here, but it's not like we're dead either! No offense, Charlie.”

“None taken,” Charlie replied with a burp. One of Jessie's neatest (in his opinion) little pieces of spellwork involved creating a mug that acted as a portal that gave whatever it contained the ability to exist on the spiritual plane. At the moment, that happened to be beer. No one was entirely sure if the burping was necessary, but not even Jared was willing to ruin Charlie's contentment by asking and possibly ruining the experience.

Nicky looked faintly abashed. “I don't see him though! That's understandable, right? I mean, I even came late on purpose!”

Jessie dropped her head in her hand and shook it with the long suffering patience of one who realized a long time ago that their friend genuinely did not have a clue how personal relationships should go.

Caroline stared at him, flipping her ponytail over her shoulder again with a scornful little toss of her head. “So you sent someone none of us know in here, and then you came late on purpose because, let me guess, you didn't want to look like a lost puppy checking out the door every five seconds, and it never occurred to you that maybe he got tired of waiting and left?” For such a perky blonde, Caroline could turn scathing at the drop of a hat.

Nicky squirmed on his stool.

“Well... it *seemed* like a good idea at the time. But he didn't stick around, so it doesn't matter! And besides, I was only about fifteen minutes late!”

Jared shook his head as he walked toward the back to put away the ice bucket.

“Man, even I know better than that, and I can't keep a girl around to save my life. No offense, Charlie.”

“None taken,” Charlie replied with equanimity. He had never realized how many turns of phrase involved life or death until he himself switched from one side to the other.

“Hey, Jared, check the bathroom for trash and toilet paper on your way back, please,” Jessie called before turning back to the matter at hand.

“Admittedly, I don't really remember seeing a stranger hanging around tonight. What does he look like? And what's his name? Also, have you tried calling him or do you have a picture, she asks, knowing that of course you didn't, you just immediately broke down into hysterics and started talking like you came off the cover of the best selling romance novel of the decade?”

Now Nicky rolled his eyes. Jessie felt herself get twitchy as she resisted the urge to pop him on the arm.

“I do not talk like that,” he protested.

“Well, no, not when you remember what year it is,” Jessie replied. Nicky pulled out his phone.

“His name is Warsaw, and unfortunately, I can't take a picture. Gargoyles turn into stone in front of a camera,” he showed her a picture of him lovingly kissing a stone... lion? dog? on the cheek while gazing coquettishly at what was obviously a phone camera perched at the end of a selfie stick.

“You carry a selfie stick? Of course you do. Why do I even ask?” She snorted in amusement.

Caroline snickered, grabbing the phone, “You're such an adorable couple! Do you think your kids would have your eyes or his density?”

“Ha ha!” Nicky glared as he snatched the phone out of her grasp. “You're so funny.” He tried—and failed—to regain some control of the conversation. By this point, Caroline was giggling uncontrollably, and Charlie laughed himself through his stool.

“Okay, okay, let's calm down,” Jessie grinned. “Try to call him. See what happens.”

“Fine, if it will get you all to stop cackling like a pack of hyenas,” Nicky huffed as he hit a button and held the phone to his ear.

“Wait, did you hear that?” Caroline switched from hilarity to alert in seconds. Jessie was way ahead of her.

She met Nicky's eyes with a growing sense of dread. Out of nowhere, a phone had begun to ring, a muffled sound that could only come from behind a closed door.

At the same time, they heard Jared's scream and the thud as he fell over backwards, scrambling away from the bathroom. Inside was a lifeless body that once belonged to a shy, love struck creature who had, for one brief, shining moment, thought he could have everything his heart, which would never be stone, had ever longed for and found in the deep, deep love of a whimsical, sometimes overly dramatic, slightly narcissistic vampire.

It took the sheriff's department less than ten minutes to get there, but it felt like ten hours.

“Thank you, John. I'll have Cassie go over the security footage to see if she can get anything useful out of it,” Jessie murmured to Sheriff John Rossford as he followed the shroud covered gurney out the door and to the waiting ambulance.

Nicky was in shock. For the first time in the centuries since his and Jessie's improbable friendship had formed, he was silent. He sat in the corner staring at the wall with empty eyes as if officers and techs weren't milling around marking, measuring, and painstakingly plucking unidentifiable things from the floor into small plastic bags sealed with caution tape.

Caroline came around the bar to Jessie, her blue eyes full of concern.

“What should we do? I'm worried about him,” she whispered to Jessie. Jessie swallowed the urge to point out that whispering was pointless in front of a vampire since their senses were dialed up to fifteen.

“Keep an eye on him, will you? There are some blood bags in the cooler. Maybe heat up an AB negative and see if he'll drink it. I'm going to make a phone call.”

Caroline nodded and hurried away. Jessie sighed as she pulled out her phone and scrolled through the contacts.

“I just hope he picks up this time,” she muttered under breath as the line began ringing on the other end.

“Hello?”

Her relief at hearing the faintly accented, urbane voice was palpable.

“Hey, Mikael, it’s Jessie. Do you have a minute?”

“Jessica! How delightful to hear from you! It’s been too long. How is my rapsSCALLION of a brother?”

“It’s good to talk to you too. Nicky- I mean Nicodemus- is actually why I’m calling. Something happened, and I wanted to get your take on it”

Mikael chose to ignore the diminutive of his brother’s name (honestly, why would anyone want to shorten such a fine, upstanding name like Nicodemus? It was baffling!) and instead politely replied,

“Of course! Anything for our favorite witch. What’s going on?”

Jessie sighed.

“His lover turned up dead in my bathroom. He hasn’t spoken a word to anyone in over an hour.” She raised a questioning eyebrow at Caroline, who stood by Nicky, helplessly holding a steaming mug filled with red liquid. Caroline frowned and shook her head.

“He’s even refusing to drink. I’ve never seen him like this.”

The silence on the other end grew heavier before Mikael carefully replied, “I see. Yes, that is unlike him.”

It’s not that Nicky’s lovers had a tendency to turn up dead, although when you fall for a vampire, there are some inherent risks. While he genuinely cared about and mourned every ended relationship, regardless of whether or not the other party was still alive—or whatever passed for alive, he could shift through the phases of a broken heart with enviable speed. The standing pool around the bar put him between forty-eight and seventy-three hours of recovery time. But with those phases came a good amount of crying, moping, declarations that he simply could not go on; there was almost a script.

“Do you need me to come there?”

Jessie felt some tension go out of her shoulders at the idea that maybe she wouldn't have to circumnavigate this strange, new Nicky alone.

"If you have time. I know you're pretty busy with the FCWH alliance talks."

The Fae, Cryptid, Witch, and Human Alliance (or "fickwah", as Jessie and Nicky liked to call it behind Mikael's back) was instrumental in creating the Cohabitation Act designed to ensure equal rights for all groups and outlaw hunting and persecution. As one of the oldest vampires in the world, Mikael took his responsibilities as ambassador very seriously and sought to help the emissaries from each group broker peace among the various races, species, and alignments that populated the continent.

Jessie, who was glad she and her best friend Greta had long ago shunted the roles of representative and head of the Witch Council for the witching community off on their close friend Isabel, sometimes let the Alliance hold informal get-togethers at her bar whenever emissaries visited Atlanta. Usually only the fae and cryptid representatives showed up. The humans were trying, but it was hard to overcome centuries of distrust and persecution on all sides.

Before Mikael could reply, Jessie's phone beeped. She was surprised to see the sheriff's office on the caller ID.

"Hold on a sec. The sheriff is calling. I'll be right back," she didn't wait for a reply before switching over.

"Hey, what's up?" She asked, trying not to sound too worried. Maybe he just forgot something, but when the sheriff is a werewolf with a damn good nose and eye for detail, that's not likely.

"Hey, Jessie. I got something to run by you," he said, trying to sound nonchalant and failing miserably.

"Sure, what is it?"

"Well, I picked up a scent I couldn't place around the body, and it kept niggling at the back of my mind, so I rushed the prints when we got back to the station."

"Okay, and?" she asked.

"I just got them back."

Jessie waited while the silence grew and strongly resisted the urge to see if she had the power to come through a phone line and shake the person on the other end.

“Sheriff, what—”

“I don’t know where Nicky found this kid, but this is big, Jessie. Your boy is the head secretary for the Western European cryptid representative, Madame Blanche.”

Jessie sat down with a thud. Luckily she managed not to miss the bar stool and wind up on the floor.

“What did you smell?” she asked.

“What?” he sounded puzzled.

“You said you smelled something that made you rush his fingerprints. What was it?”

His voice turned grim. “Acid. Our tech is pretty sure it’s either hydrochloric or nitric, but either way, they’re both used to dissolve rock. I gotta do some more digging, but I can’t imagine many other ways to kill a gargoyle.”

“Okay, keep me posted if you find anything else. I’ll take a look around and see if I can figure out what the killer might have used or when and where this happened.”

“Thanks. We don’t know a lot about gargoyles, so it’s hard to tell if he was killed somewhere else and dumped there or if he was attacked in your building. And Jessie—be careful,” he warned. “Anything that can kill a stone is going to be extra lethal against flesh, no matter who or what you are.”

“Understood. Thanks, John.” Jessie switched back to Mikael who patiently waited on the other end.

“We have a problem. You need to come here now,” she said without preamble.

“What is it?”

“Nicodemus’ lover was Madame Blanche’s head secretary.”

She heard the sharp inhale of breath on the other end, her mind pausing to marvel that a creature that did not have to breathe could still make such a gesture.

Madame Blanche, an affectation to try to help people forget that she was the *de facto* ruler of the *Dames Blanches*, or the White

Ladies native to France, had been the target of splinter cells among the cryptid community ever since she assumed her position among the Alliance and fought to bring cryptids into the open.

Not everyone was happy with the change. Humans were inherently distrustful of what they couldn't understand, a large number of cryptid and fae feared humans and witches and wanted to stay invisible, and the witches never forgot the not so long ago witch hunts. Jessie and Greta themselves had been leery of coming out of the shadows and never really stopped looking over their shoulders for the pitchfork and torch laden mobs.

"I'll be there within the hour," Mikael's tone was sharp. "Meanwhile, try to get Nicodemus to eat something. Call me if anything changes."

"You got it," Jessie replied before ending the call and absentmindedly shoving the phone in a pocket.

For a prominent cryptid leader's secretary— who was romantically involved with the brother of one of the leaders of the alliance— to wind up dead in a witch's bar that was frequented by local humans, the fae, and other cryptids was sure to raise a few eyebrows and point even more fingers, regardless of Jessie's reputation. She needed to get to the bottom of it and fast.

Chapter 2

JESSIE SIGHED, WINCING as she tried to massage a knot out of her shoulders. It had been a long night. Mikael had finally convinced Nicky to go home with him, and she had begun the arduous task of cleaning up behind the investigators and looking around on her own. The sheriff's CSI crew had been pretty thorough, including taking all of her trash and going over the entire bar with a fine tooth comb.

Her best efforts to comb through social media had turned up very little, probably due to the fact that gargoyles don't photograph as anything living, so she had turned to news searches, which weren't much better.

Her own security cameras were no help. They showed Warsaw walking in the bar and going straight into the bathroom (the fact that gargoyles turn to stone on camera made for an interesting display) and then nothing until Jared passed down the hallway to get ice about twenty minutes later. So either someone had the power to turn invisible, or someone had tampered with her cameras. Unfortunately, either option was possible.

"Hello, hello!" a cheery voice called out along with tinkling from the bell over her front door.

"Oh, hey, Cassie," Jessie waved to the young human woman headed her way.

Best known for her sharp mind, Cassandra Rodriguez's skills with technology made her an invaluable asset. She had worked tirelessly to insulate and rewire cell phones, cameras, everything Jessie needed short of building an actual computer, hence the old fashioned cash register still in use behind the bar. Being able to work with technology without shorting out everything with an electromagnetic field was one of the greatest advantages of being human, and Cassie chose to use her talents to help the local magical community.

"So... anything new?" Cassie asked in what was probably the least subtle fishing attempt ever as she absentmindedly played with her long, thick, black braid. As if everyone in a town this small didn't

already know that something bad went down last night. Jessie shot her a slightly exasperated glance.

“Whatever would make you think there’s anything new?” she asked innocently.

“Oh, come on! What happened? We saw the sheriff’s department and ambulance lights. Did the succubus get someone else?”

Jessie took a deep breath to get her temper under control.

“That’s enough, young lady!” Charlie popped up out of nowhere, a faint reddish tint coloring his normally translucent incorporeal form. “That was an accident, and you know it! Mary Jo didn’t do anything I didn’t ask for, and if you can’t handle that then maybe this isn’t the place you should be.”

Jessie winced internally. On the one hand, it was great hearing someone else say what she thought. On the other, business wasn’t booming to the point that she could afford to pay some outside firm even more money to modify and maintain her equipment. At the same time, Jessie felt a twinge of sympathy. It was no secret that Cassie had a thing for Jared. It also wasn’t a secret that Jared and Mary Jo’s daughter, Ruth Ann, had been hooking up ever since Ruth Ann began to come into her own powers.

“Sorry, Charlie,” she said, abashed. “You’re right. That was uncalled for.”

“Hey, while you’re here can you take a look at something for me?” Jessie asked, in a very obvious attempt to change the subject.

“I guess,” Cassie’s voice was subdued.

“You’re right, something did happen last night. You’ll find out eventually, so you might as well hear about it now. Someone was killed in the bathroom. The weird part is we can see the victim go into the bathroom but then there’s nothing until Jared walks by about twenty minutes later. I can’t tell if someone messed with the camera or not. Can you take a look?”

Cassie couldn’t pass up the opportunity. Her insane curiosity was legendary.

“I suppose, since I’m already here,” she said, trying to sound offhand, as she followed Jessie to the office.

“What am I looking at—is that a moving *stone*?” her jaw dropped. Jessie sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose against the headache she felt coming on.

“Yeah, apparently Nicky’s been dating a gargoyle, he sent the poor guy in here alone to meet everyone and then showed up late on purpose so he wouldn’t look— I don’t know, I guess he didn’t want to look like he was waiting for someone, but Warsaw—that’s the gargoyle—tried to go into the bathroom, and the moving stone is what happens when a gargoyle is caught on camera.”

Cassie stared.

“Okay, so skipping past whatever made Nicky decide *that* was a good idea, what happened next?”

“Well, nothing. Jared comes by about a little later to grab ice, then I send him to make sure the bathroom’s stocked, and that’s when he found Warsaw. He was already dead.”

“Poor thing,” Cassie murmured. “Let me see the rest of the footage between when he goes in the bathroom and when Jared finds him.”

“Knock yourself out,” Jessie replied, turning the mouse over to the other girl.

Charlie had disappeared back to wherever he stayed these days, which was probably a good thing. He was still fond of Mary Jo, and what’s a little death between friends with occasional benefits? Still, she made a mental note to see if he could detect any residual... something from Warsaw’s death after Cassie left. It occurred to her that she had a golden opportunity to learn what ghosts could and could not do for posterity and had not taken advantage of it.

“Hey, Jessie! Take a look at this!”

“What’d you find?” Jessie turned back to the screen.

“Well, we can rule out someone messing with the camera,” Cassie told her. “The pseudo magnetic field you generate as a witch guarantees that anyone who tried to mess with my work would have shorted everything out since it’s all tuned to your magic signature. It could have been a shapeshifter, but even something as small as a bug would have triggered the motion sensor,” she pointed to the

green bar at the bottom of the screen that remained serenely still, showing no movement.

“So that leaves invisibility. But there’s no such thing as true invisibility by disappearing. You become invisible by bending the light. So if I do this,” she tweaked a dial, and the screen suddenly shifted into shades of white, orange, and red, “we have ourselves an infrared heat signature! Someone slipped into the bathroom ahead of Warsaw —probably so he wouldn’t suspect anything when he tried to shut the door—and then came out again when Jared opened the door.”

“Can you see what they did next?” Jessie asked.

“They walked to the front door and slipped out in all the commotion.”

“Damn! So we can’t see who it is at all.”

“No, *you* can’t,” Cassie sounded smug.

Jessie raised an eyebrow and waited for Cassie to finish delighting in her own cleverness. Cassie caught the look on Jessie’s face and started guiltily.

“Sorry! You know the QuikTrip next door? I did their security system. George Dunn, the owner, comes in here all the time. I bet he’d let us look at his cameras and see if anyone shows up.”

“Great, let’s go!” Jessie was already running down the hall, Cassie on her heels. Unfortunately for her investigation, she was stopped short at the front door when a vampire came through followed by a fairy, a very pale woman, and a giant cat, and who, from their appearances and the looks on their faces, were clearly members of the supernatural community, very important, and very unhappy.

“Well, fuck,” she said, coming to a dead stop.

Jessie and Cassie were face to face with a strikingly handsome, gray eyed vampire whose long, raven black hair was pulled back in a top knot.

He hated the term man bun. Jessie and Nicky used it often.

Mikael was impeccably dressed in a slate gray bespoke suit over a royal blue button up shirt open at the neck that complimented his slim, athletic build. Everything he wore complimented his build. Vampires tended to be focused on the more materialistic aspects of life, but the brothers took it to a whole different level.

Next to him was a tall, slender, extremely pale woman wearing a simple but elegant pale green sleeveless sheath dress, suitable for an afternoon at a place much nicer than Jessie's small town bar, and cream colored kitten heeled pumps with only a fire opal on a delicate gold chain around her slender throat for jewelry. Her long, silver blonde hair hung loose except for some intricate braiding at the temples.

Behind her was a fairy hovering slightly off the ground and dripping dust everywhere and wearing a wrinkled black suit with an untucked shirt. He looked like he had rolled out of bed and into the first thing he could find on the floor.

Bringing up the rear was a very large black cat, probably the size of a wolfhound, who looked her up and down, clearly passed some sort of judgment on her faded t-shirt and ancient but perfectly broken-in jeans, and offered her an extravagant yawn that practically reeked of amusement.

"Um, Jess, I'm just gonna go do that thing we talked about," Cassie nervously edged past the group and flat out ran out the door, leaving Jessie to face them alone.

"Jessica! So wonderful to see you!" Mikael came forward, offering her his hands.

She plastered a very fake smile on her face as she met his eyes and glared daggers. He winced.

"Please accept my apologies for not calling ahead. We were in the neighborhood and decided to drop in for a quick drink."

Which was Mikael for "these are very important people, please don't start an international incident."

"No, no! What a simply *delightful* surprise! I'm thrilled! I can't *wait* to share my joy at this moment later!"

Mikael winced harder. The puck looked like he had just walked into the most disgusting pig sty ever created. The woman looked almost as amused as the cat. The cat jumped on the bar, found the sunspot coming from the old cut glass windows that lined the walls, and promptly passed out. Jessie swallowed a sigh and pulled away, walking to the bar to greet her guests.

“Welcome! It’s a delight to host such esteemed guests. Please enjoy my hospitality freely under no obligation or compulsion.”

The puck looked like he wanted to be anywhere but there.

“We’ll see,” he sniffed, his accent placing him somewhere around Wales.

“Jessica, this is Robin the Puck, Oberon’s ambassador to the United States,” Mikael gestured with a slight bow. Jessie inclined her head. As a witch, particularly one as old and powerful as she was, she was not under any obligation to bow or otherwise indicate that she owed fealty to any member of the magical, cryptid, or human communities, but it didn’t hurt to play nice.

“And this is Madame Blanche, emissary of the cryptid community to France,” Mikael’s tone took on a guarded note. Ah. So Madame Blanche must already know about Warsaw.

“*Merci pour votre hospitalité, mademoiselle,*” Madame Blanche inclined her head in return. “I welcome the opportunity to speak with you further.”

“And this,” Mikael now sounded annoyed. He did not like things that didn’t fit into neat, little packages. Sometimes Jessie wondered how he ever became such close friends with a pair of witches, arguably the messiest and least predictable of the magical tribes.

“Is Rupert, Madame Blanche’s companion.” He gestured to the cat who flopped over onto his back and pointedly continued to sleep while taking up half the bar for sunbathing.

Jessie stared, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice. “Forgive my curiosity, but is he a *Matagot*? I’ve never heard of them traveling outside of France or had the pleasure of meeting one.”

A Matagot could probably be best described as chaotic neutral. Spirits that preferred the shape of a black cat, although they weren’t opposed to being a raven, fox, dog, or whatever else struck their fancy, they could bring evil or good depending on how they were treated in return.

“Why, yes!” Madame Blanche sounded pleased. “He is very helpful in my travels and is an excellent companion. I understand that you helped with the effort that saved them from near extinction.”

Rupert twitched an ear in acknowledgement of the praise.

“Yes, I did along with our dear friend Greta,” Jessie nodded to Mikael. “Okay then! Can I offer any of you some refreshment? Food and drink may be freely enjoyed in my establishment with no obligation, trickery, or attempt on your person or life be it physical or otherwise.”

“I doubt that,” Robin muttered, squinting at the nearest stool, running his finger along the seat, and squinting at it in disapproval. Jessie chose to ignore the blatant rudeness. It was not normal, of that she was certain. The local faery population had its ups and downs, and some could be as snobbish as the next person, but an emissary representing the king of all Fairy was expected to behave with aplomb. That he chose not to verged on insupportable. To call him out without more information certainly would be. Madame Blanche did not share Jessie’s reservations.

“Unlike others in my party, I accept your offer in all the grace with which it was given and am grateful for your undoubtedly delightful hospitality,” she said before sliding onto a stool in front of Rupert. Rupert granted his approval by opening one eye and purring, a deep, rusty thing that made the bar vibrate. Robin scowled but didn’t say anything. He dropped onto a different, presumably less offensive stool and glared.

“I don’t suppose you have any decent white wine,” he sniffed, clearly without any high expectations.

“Italian or French? There’s a lovely Vernaccia I picked up in Tuscany which is delightful for a fall afternoon, and this White Bordeaux from the Pessac-Léognan region is a bit rich but quite nice.”

Robin scowled. Mikael hid a smile, and Madame Blanche openly grinned.

“Robin, stop being such a little pest,” she said primly before turning back to Jessie. “I would love the Bordeaux, *s’il vous plaît*. My rather grumpy companion will have the Vernaccia.”

“My pleasure,” Jessie replied, pouring the wine and passing the glasses over the bar. Robin, of course, inspected his glass minutely, clearing looking for something wrong. She wondered how much longer she would have to put up with this.

Madame Blanche delicately rolled her glass between her fingertips before taking a sip.

“Quite lovely, my dear,” she approved. Robin scowled but didn’t say anything before draining his glass in one swallow. Jessie stared at him blandly without offering a refill. She had fulfilled her obligations as host and wasn’t going to cater to this little prick any longer than she had to. Picking up on her mood, Mikael (finally!) spoke up.

“Well, this has been lovely,” he beamed as if they had met for a stroll through the park instead of the murder scene of one delegate’s secretary while enduring the rotten attitude of the other.

“We still have many more fascinating people to meet. Robin, perhaps you would like to be introduced to the leader of the local fairy Court?”

“I highly doubt it,” Robin muttered under his breath but stomped out the door anyway. Jessie let out a huffy breath.

Madame Blanche shook her head. “Honestly, I don’t know what’s going on with him. He’s never been like this before. It’s as if he’s a completely different puck.”

Jessie frowned. “Is that normal? I must admit I’ve never heard of pucks or any of the fae going through personality changes like that. I kind of wanted to hit him over the head with a bottle.”

“You wouldn’t be the first on this trip,” said Rupert in a gravelly, rusty voice, making Jessie jump in surprise.

Madame Blanche chuckled and took another sip of wine before sobering.

“I apologize for our unexpected visit. You must know why it was necessary,” she said, looking up at Jessie with grief-stricken eyes.

“I do, and I’m so sorry,” Jessie replied. “All we know so far is that he came to meet Nicky- that’s Nicodemus, Mikael’s brother- and was... killed,” she winced as she said the word, “in the bathroom. The sheriff, who is an excellent werewolf,” here Rupert sniffed in disgust but didn’t offer any comments after Madame Blanche shot a glare in his direction, “found traces of acid on the body. They sent them to a lab, but they’re pretty sure it’s either hydrochloric or nitric—something used to dissolve rock.”

She put Robin's glass in the sink and wiped down the bar, a gesture that came more from habit than necessity.

"We can't see anyone else in the hallway when he went into the bathroom on our cameras, but Cassie—that's the girl who was with me when you came in and handles all of my tech support—used a special setting on the camera to pick up a heat signature. I was about to go next door to see if their cameras had anything from the parking lot and then send it to the sheriff when you got here. That's all we know right now. I'm sorry."

Madame Blanche was silent for a moment.

"I see," she said, unconsciously reaching for the fire opal pendant at her throat and rubbing it between her fingers as if the stone somehow gave her comfort. "And where is my dear Warsaw now?"

"At the coroner's office. I can take you to him if you like," Jessie offered.

"Yes, I would like that. Thank you for your hospitality. Rupert? Are you coming?"

It hadn't actually occurred to Jessie that the giant cat would just hang out and sleep on the bar.

"I suppose I must, to make sure nothing has been bungled," he yawned, showing off razor sharp teeth and a raspy pink tongue.

"You're too kind," Madame Blanche said dryly. "Shall we then?"

"After you," Jessie gestured toward the door, grabbing her phone and keys and hoping they would all fit in her little ancient Prelude.

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IF THE SHERIFF WAS surprised to see a tall, pale, almost translucent woman followed by an enormous black cat come through his door, he didn't show it. He tipped his hat.

"Ma'am, Jessie, uh—"

"Rupert," Jessie piped up helpfully.

"Rupert. What can I do for you folks? I assume you're here about your friend? I'm sorry for your loss, by the way."

"My, how civilized for a... canine," Rupert muttered.

“Behave,” Madame Blanche admonished him sharply. Jessie briefly considered pointing out that some Matagots preferred to appear as big, black dogs and then decided to let it drop. Rupert chose to ignore them all and groom a front paw.

“Sorry we didn’t call ahead, John,” Jessie said. “Madame Blanche wanted to see... him, and I have camera footage for you.”

“No worries,” the sheriff pushed himself up from the desk. Tall and stocky with a shock of sandy blonde hair, angular face softened by a neat if slightly unruly beard, and hazel eyes that turned liquid gold in his wolf form, he moved with a quiet, animal grace. He led the local pack. Jessie had always counted him among her favorite people.

“Follow me,” he headed out the door to the elevators leading down to the morgue.

Rupert yawned and stretched before following the rest of the group. As they entered the elevator, his mien of lazy indifference dropped, and he became as alert as if he were on the prowl. Sheriff Rossford shot the big cat a glance of approval.

“Glad y’all are here. Kind of stumped on this one. All we found so far are the trace hints of acid, but we haven’t gotten the results back on what kind it was.”

“Does it matter? We know that someone intended to kill my dear Warsaw for reasons we do not understand,” Madame Blanche’s voice was tight around the edges.

“Well ma’am, if we know what kind it was then maybe we can narrow down where it came from or who made it. Jess, what did you get on camera? I thought nothing showed up.”

“Yeah, turns out Cassie has something called an infrared setting on my cameras? She made a copy for me to give you.”

“What did she see?” he reached for the thumb drive Jessie pulled from her bag.

“The hall looks empty, but the infrared picked up a heat signature that ducked in the bathroom before Warsaw did and left when Jared opened the door to check on supplies. Then it slipped out the front door in all the confusion. Cassie’s asking the owner at the QuikTrip next door if he’ll let her see if his cameras got anything. They pick up part of my parking lot.”

Sheriff Rossford nodded approvingly. “Good. Do me a favor and tell her to get in touch with me as soon as she’s done. You can give her my cell phone number.”

“Yes, sir!” Jessie snapped a salute and ignored his eye roll to send Cassie a quick text. “I told her to send you the recordings.”

“Thank you. Greatly appreciate it.”

The doors opened to a blast of cold air and the heavy smell of chemicals and decay, something Jessie always thought about whenever she came across the phrase, “smelled like death”. She took a deep breath and noticed Madame Blanche do the same. Interesting. Did white ladies, who were essentially part of the ghost world, need to breathe? Then Jessie noticed the tightening around the emissary’s mouth and realized Madame Blanche was trying to keep herself under control.

A wave of sympathy washed over Jessie. By all accounts, Madame Blanche was kind and attentive to everyone who worked for her. She took personal interest in her employees’ lives and believed that if they were happy and fulfilled at home, then they would bring that same energy to their work. It would be so easy for someone in her position to abuse power, but she never had.

“Right this way,” the sheriff gestured toward a table at the back of the morgue. Jessie could see the misshapen form under the sheet.

“I need to warn you, this will not be pretty. Gargoyles revert to their stone form once rigor mortis sets in, and the acid did its job well. If we hadn’t gotten to him as early as we did in time to get fingerprints and photos of the crime scene, we wouldn’t have been able to make a positive ID.”

Jessie felt Madame Blanche tense next to her. “It’ll be okay,” she murmured, gently touching the other woman’s shoulder.

Madame Blanche grimaced.

“If you say so,” she replied. “Let’s, how you say, ‘do this thing’.”

Whatever Jessie thought she was expecting, nothing prepared her for what she saw when the sheriff unceremoniously pulled the sheet off the table. If she hadn’t seen Warsaw’s body firsthand, she never would have known that he was the same creature as the misshapen, twisted, corroded lump of stone on the table. If she

squinted just right, she could see where there *might* have been a face and maybe some arms.

Madame Blanche couldn't hide her gasp of dismay.

"No! Oh, my poor Warsaw! What have they done to you?"

"Sheriff, I don't understand. If he was hit with enough acid to cause this much damage, why did he look... well, normal when we found him?"

"The corrosion didn't spread from the outside, Jessie," the sheriff grimly replied, hoping she got his meaning so he didn't have to say the awful truth out loud. She stared at him in horror, realization setting in.

"Oh Goddess, no," she covered her mouth with her hand.

"Yeah. 'Fraid so," he shook his head. If the corrosion didn't start from the outside, then that only meant one thing. Warsaw's murderer had forced him to drink enough acid to eat through solid stone all the way to the surface of his body.

The silence was broken by a thud as Madame Blanche hit the floor in a dead faint.

Chapter 3

THE ATMOSPHERE AT THE bar was subdued. Jessie stared at the water rings on the bar as she absentmindedly spun a glass of sweet tea around her fingers. Rupert watched with a narrow eyed gaze. Madame Blanche had returned to her hotel to recover from her shock.

“So tell me about this Nicodemus,” he said in his raspy voice.

“Hmm? Oh,” Jessie shook herself out of her reverie. The horror she had felt at learning how horribly Warsaw had to die had not abated. Who would do something so unspeakably cruel? From all accounts he had been a sweet, quiet, intelligent young gargoyle who never hurt anyone.

“Well, he’s one of my oldest and best friends. I love him dearly, but he can be a bit... flighty. Warsaw was the first time in a very long time he truly fell for someone. This hit him hard,” she said, feeling a rush of guilt as she realized she hadn’t checked on him since Mikael took him home.

“I see,” Rupert’s voice, though even, still somehow managed to sound threatening. Jessie stared at him.

“Wait. Do you think he’s responsible for this?” she demanded.

“I’m simply covering all the bases, *ma cherie*,” Rupert began grooming his tail. Jessie swallowed her anger and frustration and tried to remind herself that the French contingency didn’t know Nicky like she did.

“How long had they known each other?” he asked, pointedly ignoring her irritation. She squinted, trying to remember all of Nicky’s love-stricken ramblings.

“A few months. Nicky’s an artist, and he had a gallery opening in New York. That’s where they met. Apparently Warsaw hates—hated—Nicky’s favorite piece, and they argued over coffee and wine for hours before ending up in France at the Louvre for two weeks so Nicky could make some artistic point or other. Nicky fell hard. Like, really hard. Believe what you want, but he would never resort to

something this cruel or underhanded to get rid of a lover. The term ‘ghosting’ was made with him in mind.”

“Well then,” Rupert stretched and yawned, pink tongue curling between his fangs. “It seems we must look elsewhere for the culprit.”

He was interrupted when Cassie burst through the door.

“I got George to let me take a look at the footage—” she came to a dead stop at the sight of a black cat the size of a large dog on the bar. “Is that a *Matagot*?” she exclaimed in disbelief, forgetting that Rupert had been there when she and Jessie ran into the delegates earlier.

“Rupert, this is Cassie. Cassie, Rupert. Rupert is Madame Blanche’s associate, and Cassie is my technological guru.”

“Nice to meet you,” Cassie nervously sketched a little bobbing curtsy. “*Enchanté, mademoiselle,*” Rupert regally inclined his head.

“You were saying about George?” Jessie nudged Cassie back on track.

“Oh, right! So yeah, he let me look at the camera. I got something, but I don’t know how much it will help. I could see the door open, and then at the edge of the parking lot a guy suddenly showed up. He was all dressed in black, and I couldn’t see his face. Here, I recorded it for you.”

The three of them huddled around Cassie’s phone and watched as a man in a black hoodie and black pants with his head down suddenly appeared, holding his wrist and shaking violently before vomiting in the grass. Jessie frowned. Rupert looked at her.

“Interesting reaction. Perhaps an aftermath of adrenaline?” he suggested.

“Maybe, but that’s also what it looks like when a human comes out of a witch’s spell, especially anything transformative. The stronger the spell, the stronger the reaction,” she explained. “See how he’s holding his wrist? He may have had some kind of talisman that let him stay invisible as long as he needed to be— probably that bracelet he’s wearing. Unlike a spell that’s directly cast on a person, talisman spells don’t have a time limit. They last until all of the power stored in them is used up. We need to get this to the sheriff.”

“You do it,” Cassie said. “I’m going to go back over your cameras and see if anyone matching his general build has been around here

lately.”

“Good idea,” Jessie shot the girl a quick, grateful smile.

Rupert jumped off the bar, somehow making no sound whatsoever despite his size. “I believe I shall accompany *mademoiselle* Cassie. I might be able to help our young friend here identify our mystery caller. Should my companion feel up to leaving her hotel room, please be so kind as to let me know.”

“Of course. Yell if you find anything.”

“K, see ya!” Cassie was already halfway down the hall, Rupert padding along behind. Jessie shook her head as she grabbed her phone and dialed the sheriff’s number from memory while mentally kicking herself for shrugging off Mikael’s painstaking attempts to school her in politics.

The factions that made up the world’s population existed in kind of an uneasy truce. Because none of them were stronger than another, a balance had to be maintained, much like the cardinal corners and elements. Within each group were races, species, and creeds who all had unique specializations and skills. Some were nocturnal, some diurnal, some crepuscular, some were stronger in summer or fall, others in winter or spring, and all had strengths and weaknesses.

Fae were pure magic and had the strongest illusions. Most had humanoid forms with otherworldly features, sharply planed bone structures, cat eyes, and delicately pointed ears, and they uniformly possessed the ability to manipulate and mold the perceptions of others known as glamour. Iron burned them, and they were technologically inept.

Witches were creatures of nature. They drew on leylines for power, and each witch was attuned to an element that was the base of their power. They were technological disasters; their natural magnetic fields wiped out pretty much everything they came in contact with that wasn’t witch-proofed.

Cryptids were by far the most complicated of the factions. Made up of an enormous plethora of creatures from around the world, they could exist in day, night, any time of the year and had more strengths and weaknesses than one could count. The many species that made up the cryptid family were still being cataloged, and Jessie felt that it

was an undertaking that could go on forever. As far as anyone knew, their one uniform weakness was metal, especially silver, followed by iron, and they could not perform magic beyond the instinctive magic that fueled their transformations and defenses.

And humans were hardly at the bottom of the totem pole. Capable of advancing technology at lightning speed, humans were more innovative, inventive, and ruthless than the rest of the factions. Their ability to handle all metals also gave them an advantage.

Mikael had been instrumental in forming the alliance, but its hold was tenuous at best. Despite the seeming peace that encompassed the world, there were factions within factions who believed that they shouldn't be part of any world order. Some, especially among the more shy and lesser known cryptids and fae, wanted to be left alone to live out their lives in peaceful obscurity, but dangerous others among the witches, cryptids, fae, and humans alike felt that maybe they were the superior species after all. It was pretty obvious to Jessie that the attack on Warsaw was political, which made tracking down the guilty party even harder.

The sheriff's voice broke through her musing. "Hey, Jessie, what's up?"

"Hey, John, I'm about to send you the footage Cassie got from George at the QuikTrip. She found something. It's not much to work with, but we might have our killer. We can't see his face, just his back and a hoodie. It's all circumstantial," she sighed in frustration. "We're checking the rest of my camera footage to see if anyone who looks like him from the back could have been at the bar lately."

"Gotcha. Can you put it on the thumb drive you gave me earlier for me? I just grabbed lunch, so I can be there in a second."

"Sure thing," Jessie said, glad that Cassie was still there.

"Great, see you in a little bit," he hung up without waiting for a response.

"Well, that was a waste of time," Cassie remarked as she walked back in the bar with Rupert on her heels. The big cat jumped back onto the bar and started grooming himself.

"Apparently Nicky has a goth fan club. Our killer could be any one of about twenty guys, although based on height, I think I have it

narrowed down to three. We need a way to narrow it down further.”

“Well, let’s think,” Jessie said, staring thoughtfully at the bar. “We know they’re probably human. Any fae or witch can cast their own illusions or transformation magic, and cryptids are immune to transformative magic.”

“I didn’t know that,” Cassie was surprised. “Even if it was something that cloaked them without changing them?”

“Yes. Because cryptids have their own instinctive magic, any outside magic just bounces right off with the exception of Fae glamour.”

“Why aren’t they immune to Fae glamour?” Cassie asked curiously.

“Because Fae glamour is defensive,” Jessie explained. “It’s part of the checks and balances of the magical world. We all have ways to defend ourselves through either immunity or defense. Cryptids also don’t usually have that kind of reaction when they shapeshift. But one possibility is a magical force field that doesn’t directly cloak them. Hey, Rupert, can I borrow you for a minute?”

Rupert glared at her out of emerald green eyes. “If anyone else had been killed, I would scratch you to bits for even suggesting such a thing. I will allow it just this once.”

“Aw, thanks. Just for that I’ll buy you the best tuna I can find.”

“I will accept nothing less than sushi grade. What must I do?”

“Just hold still and let me see if this works.”

Jessie moved behind the bar and dug around until she came up with a piece of string. She gathered her magic as she drew on the love and energy imbued in the old wooden bar as she walked past. She whispered the suggestion that the string would like to provide a field of invisibility to its wearer and clinched her fist around it to seal the spell.

“What are you doing?” Cassie asked, leaning forward to watch more closely.

“I’m drawing on the power in the bar to fuel the spell. See, all objects have some kind of energy, and the more an object is around the living and used by the living, the more power it holds. The fae use the ether and universe as the source of their magic, but witches use

the elements and objects on earth,” Jessie explained. “I use the energy from the bar all the time when I do small things around the place. The building itself is a wealth of energy, and there’s a leyline beneath the property. Greta gifted the bar to me when we were finally able to openly be witches. She had the wood cured and treated with fire to enhance my fire magic.”

“What’s her element?”

“Earth. It’s great for healing, creation, and defense, and fire is usually used for attacks, purification, and energy,” Jessie replied. “Fun fact, I actually don’t drink alcohol. Neither does Greta. It dulls our magic, but Greta still used to bartend as a front so we could sell our herbal compounds, potions, and elixirs. Now I keep the bar going, she does research for the Witch Council, and this is our home base.”

“I wish humans could do something special,” Cassie sighed, leaning her head on her hand.

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Jessie told her. “Humans are far more innovative and inventive than the rest of us. Plus, you can handle things like iron and silver pretty easily, and you can use and develop technology in a way that we can’t. Do you think I could keep this place running as well as I do without you? A witch who can use a cell phone and look at security cameras is practically unheard of.”

She carefully tied the string around Rupert’s paw and tapped it three times to release the spell. Nothing happened.

“Do you feel anything?” she asked.

“I itch,” he said flatly, ears going back. She pulled the string off his paw.

“I suspected that might be the case. The magics must be conflicting with each other. Well, at least now we know that the killer is almost definitely human. Of course we can’t rule out deception, like a witch who didn’t want me to pick up on his magic signature.”

“What are we not ruling out?” Sheriff Rossford asked, removing his hat as he walked through the door.

“We’re pretty sure the killer is human and probably one of the kids hanging around looking for Nicky. He tends to generate his own fan club, even when he’s in the middle of nowhere. Oh, Cassie, can you get the QuikTrip footage onto the thumb drive for the sheriff?”

“Way ahead of you,” Cassie held out a new one. John carefully tucked it away in a pocket. “Here, I already have it up on my phone if you want to take a look.”

“I’d appreciate that,” he replied. He watched in silence, frowning. “Not much to go on. The jacket looks generic. The bracelet could be something, maybe the source of the spell?”

“That’s what I thought too,” Jessie agreed. “It looks like he’s pretty tall based on the cars he’s standing by. Hard to get a feel for body shape though. Half the kids who come in here looking for vampires wear black jeans, black boots or shoes, and black hoodies like that.”

“Can you show this to Nicky and see if he has any ideas?” John asked. Nicky’s flightiness was legendary, but Jessie knew that was a carefully cultivated persona. In reality, Nicky saw every detail and heard every snippet of conversation and filed it all away in the infinite vaults of his eternal mind to use as he saw fit.

“I plan to tonight. If anything, he might recognize the bracelet. It’s the only unique thing we have to go on,” Jessie said.

“Well, at least it’s something. I’m going to get this back to the office and see if any of my techs can pick up any more details. Thanks, Cass. Good work,” he tipped his hat to Cassie as he headed for the door.

She beamed, “Oh, it was nothing.”

Jessie smiled. “He’s right, you know. I didn’t even think about the QuikTrip. Do you think there’s anywhere else around here with a camera we can take a look at?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. I love Nicky too. Not as much as you, obviously, but he’s my friend, and I’m gonna help him,” Cassie set her chin with stubborn determination as she swung her bag over her shoulder, scratched Rupert behind the ears—something Jessie never would have dared to try—and headed out the door.

“Don’t say a word,” he warned as he closed his eyes and dozed off again.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she grinned, grabbing her phone to call Mikael and Nicky and wondering what Caroline and Jared were going to say when they showed up for their shifts in half an hour to find a giant black cat stretched out over half the bar.

The sun had been down for about an hour when Mikael and Nicky walked in the bar. Nicky looked... flat. His normal vivacity and spark were gone. Jessie's heart twisted for her friend as she mentally vowed to make sure whoever hurt him and Warsaw this much would pay. From the looks on the faces around the bar, she wasn't the only one. He came straight to her, and she folded him into her arms.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," she murmured, stroking his shoulder-length curls. He clung to her fiercely, never saying a word. She met Mikael's worried eyes over Nicky's head. He shook his head and turned away, but not before she saw the same flash of rage streak across his face.

Nicky pulled away. "What do you want me to see?" he asked. She hadn't told them a lot over the phone.

"We got footage at the edge of the parking lot of someone who looks like he's shaking off an invisibility spell. He's probably human. Do you think you're up for taking a look? See if it's someone you know?"

"Sure," he absently ran his hands through his hair. She realized that he was disheveled—emerald green silk shirt partially untucked over tailored jeans but no belt and no jewelry, nothing like the carefully made up and costumed playboy persona he usually wore. For some reason, that made her rage flare again. This time he saw it in her eyes and reached for her hands with a sad, little smile.

"It'll be okay, Jess. I'll get over it. Promise."

She stared at him helplessly, wanting to sit down and cry. Instead she pulled her phone out of her pocket and pulled up the footage from the parking lot. Silently, she handed it over to him. His brow furrowed as he watched.

"The walk and height are familiar," he said, handing the phone back to her. "A new kid who started trying to talk to me about a week ago. I never got his name."

"Did anything else ring a bell? The bracelet maybe?"

"No," he shook his head. "I'm sorry."

Jessie sighed and hugged him to her again.

"Grab a drink. There's someone at the bar who wants to meet you if you're up for it."

“Yes, Mikael told me. I guess I might as well get this over with.” He squared his shoulders as he turned to the bar where Rupert and Madame Blanche waited, not trying to hide their curiosity and impatience.

Madame Blanche had changed into a black linen pants suit over a crimson chemise that created a stark contrast to her pale skin and hair, which she had twisted into an elegant knot. The fire opal and a pair of onyx and gold stud earrings were her only jewelry.

Robin had graced them with his presence too, bellying up to the bar and cutting ahead of several customers to loudly demand a bottle of wine, which he then chugged. His suit looked worse for the wear. His behavior baffled Jessie. The fae were renowned for their exquisite manners and grace. Robin was something out of left field, and she didn't like it.

She looked over the bar. In one corner, Charlie and Mary Jo Sutton cozied up despite his lack of a corporeal body. Mary Jo, like all succubi, found intelligence as stimulating and sexy as anything physical, and her interest in Charlie did not end with his death. Jessie suspected that was why he still hung around.

Meanwhile, her daughter, Ruth Ann, flirted outrageously with Jared, whose handsome face and athletic build kept him at the center of attention for quite a few of Jessie's regulars. Cassie glowered at the two of them from a few seats down, nursing something a vile shade of pink that Caroline had put in front of her sympathetically.

Caroline had never said anything, but Jessie had been around long enough to see that her apprentice had her own unrequited crush going too. Men may swoon day and night over Caroline's homecoming queen good looks, but she only had eyes for Cassie.

Tug, the ogre, stood impassively at the door. He was an enigma. Jared had just walked in one day with fire in his dark brown eyes, torn clothing, a cut on one arm, and Tug in tow and informed Jessie that Tug would be working for her and was interested in renting out the small apartment over the bar. Jessie, who knew Jared well enough to know that there had to be a damn good reason and he would tell her when he was ready, decided to trust his judgment. Tug had proven to be a very neat and respectful tenant and employee.

The funny thing was that ogres were supposed to be extinct. She planned to get to the bottom of that later.

At the far end of the bar, not far from where Mikael and Nicky talked to Madame Blanche in low voices, were the vampire groupies who inevitably showed up wherever vampires were known to frequent. Jessie and Caroline called them the vampies. Mikael and Nicky didn't find it as funny as they did.

Dressed all in black with pale skin and hair dyed everything from cotton candy pink to jet black, they desperately wanted to be turned or loved by the creatures of the night. Most vampires just ignored them until the attention became too intrusive or obnoxious. Then the vampires would give the kids a reason to run away—usually screaming. Mikael pointedly ignored them. Nicky had a tendency to lead them on until he became bored, much to Jessie's and Mikael's annoyance.

This was the group she paid the most attention to, looking for anyone who seemed overly attentive to Nicky. Unfortunately, that included more than half of the kids who were there that night. Cassie gave up trying to glare Ruth Ann to death and came over to where Jessie stood.

"What do you think? I figure at least four of them could be our guy."

"Yeah, I know. I need to go be a good hostess. Is there any way you can be on goth camera patrol? Maybe if we can get him—or her—walking away or can pick up jewelry, like bracelets, then we can find out who did it."

"Goth camera patrol?" Cassie asked, amused. "Sure, I'll do it over here from my phone."

"Thanks, Cass. I appreciate it," Jessie paused. "Wait, your phone? You can do that? Can I do that?"

"I mean, yeah, if you want."

"Well, yeah, if it's going to help, then it would be smart, right? I might as well learn how to make technology work to my advantage."

"Okay, I'll set it up for you. Now go schmooze, or whatever it is you do."

Jessie rolled her eyes at her friend before moving toward the bar.

“Ah, Jessie. It is quite delightful to see you again, *ma cherie*,” Madame Blanche smiled. “Darling Nicodemus has been quite obliging. It means so much to me to hear another speak so of dear Warsaw. *Merci beaucoup*.”

Nicky inclined his head and raised his glass in a toast, but not before Jessie saw pain shadow his eyes.

“*C’est mon plaisir*,” he replied.

Robin belched. “How sweet. I may vomit. How much longer do we have to stay here?”

Mikael scowled. Jessie kicked his ankle. The last thing she needed was an incident in her bar because Mikael’s strong sense of propriety was disturbed. He shot her a wounded look.

“I have business I must attend to in the city, so I will take you back to your hotel,” his tone left no room for argument. Robin wasn’t interested in arguing anyway.

“About time,” he muttered as he slid off his stool and pushed his way through the openly staring crowd and out the door, pausing only to look up at Tug with a puzzled face. Tug calmly returned the stare. He was used to it.

“Is that an—”

“Ogre, yes. We were leaving?” Mikael smoothly pushed Robin out the door. Jessie didn’t bother hiding her sigh of relief as she watched them leave. Madame Blanche followed Jessie’s gaze.

“Yes, that one is a puzzle, *non*? I have never had dealings with a fae like that except for once when we came up against the Nain Rouge,” she sipped her wine.

“Nain Rouge. Aren’t they native to Michigan?”

“Detroit, to be specific. They’re said to be born of both my land and yours. Or rather, those who lived on your land before the Europeans settled here.”

“So I’ve heard. They’re supposed to be pretty nasty characters.”

“They are *tres mal*. They are prone to trickery and delight in causing conflicts and, how do you say, scenes?”

“Interesting,” Jessie stared thoughtfully at the door. Something to ponder later, she decided, as she watched one of the more anemically attractive vampire groupies— one who was tall and wore a

black hoodie— peel himself away from the rest of the group and approach Nicky.

“Nicky,” she warned with a lift of her chin toward the young man. He moved closer, his eyes gleaming with an unnatural light of obsession that made alarm bells go off in Jessie’s head.

“Hey, Nicky, we’re all sorry to hear about Warwick,” he shuffled from one foot to another.

“Warsaw,” Nicky corrected him flatly without turning around. Jessie caught Tug’s eye and started moving toward the kid, trailing her fingertips along the bar to gather energy.

“Whatever, hey—” was as far as he got before Nicky wheeled around, baring a mouth of fangs that didn’t seem to have room in his mouth. Jessie had seen her share of vampiric transformations in her day, but they never got easier to look at. His once beautiful face was already elongating, mouth widening around bristling fangs as his skin turned grayish black and his ears became bat-like. His eyes flared red as blood as she threw up a barrier between him and the kid. The poor boy’s eyes widened in shock, and he fell backwards over a stool and into Tug’s grasp.

“Come on, time to go,” Tug’s voice, which Jessie was sure probably registered on a Richter scale, rumbled through the shocked silence.

“But... but.. He was going to *attack* me! Me! After everything I did for him!” the kid squealed, his voice climbing in outrage.

Jessie groaned and dropped her face in her hands. Obviously this was one of Nicky’s little conquests he collected when he was bored. How could she not have foreseen this happening? He was notorious for using his vampiric glamour to lure people to him and then getting tired of them just as quickly. Hell, that was who made up probably half of the ever present vampire groupies.

Nicky was already turning back to his human form. He looked at Jessie guiltily.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. Warsaw is—was—more than a ‘whatever’. I’m sorry, Jess. I didn’t mean to.”

“I know. Why don’t you go hang out in the office for a little bit, okay?”

“Okay,” he hung his head and shuffled off, looking more defeated and dejected than Jessie had ever seen him before. She sighed and turned back to the group of kids, who stared at Nicky’s retreating back, stunned.

“He attacked Morticent!” one girl shrieked in a high, unsteady voice.

“No, he didn’t. And maybe Morticent—wait, is that really his name?” Jessie stopped, blinking in surprise. She knew the names these guys came up with were ridiculous, but *Morticent*?

“Yes, he’s an artist, and he’s going to be famous!” the girl’s shrillness wasn’t going down as she drew herself up while trying—and failing—to look imperious.

“Uh huh. Well, he’s not going to be much of anything if he doesn’t stop trying to piss off vampires. If he’s that important, then you should go after him and leave Nicodemus alone.”

The girl sneered in derision at this... *witch* who dared talk to them in that tone when they were all obviously meant for better things and started to sit back down. Her attitude was really getting on Jessie’s nerves.

“That wasn’t a suggestion,” suddenly Jessie’s voice was ice cold. So cold, that the air seemed to freeze in a direct line between her and the girl. When looking at Jessie’s tiny frame and delicate features, it was easy to forget how much power she actually had. All of a sudden, she was the biggest thing in the room, and the vampires couldn’t get out of there fast enough.

“Well! That was... bracing. I think I need more wine— or perhaps something a bit stronger,” Madame Blanche remarked. Rupert’s tail was twice its normal size (which was impressive), and every hair on his body stood on end. His growl rivaled Tug’s voice for who could make the deepest rumble. Jessie thought she could see the glassware move on the bar.

“You’re telling me!” drawled a peaches and cream voice from behind them. Jessie glanced over her shoulder at Ruth Ann. As alluring as her mother, Ruth Ann was as down to earth as she was devastatingly beautiful with creamy skin dusted with a smattering of freckles, leaf green eyes, and flaming red hair that fell past her waist.

“Did you know Warsaw, Ruth Ann?” Jessie asked curiously. The Suttons pretty much made it their business to know every eligible adult around. And some who weren’t quite so eligible, truth be told.

“Yeah, I tried to crack that one—no pun intended, so no offense—but he was too much in love. That’s the only way a being can really be immune to someone like me, you know? Do me a favor, Miss Jessie, if you don’t mind, and let Nicky know how much Warsaw loved him for me.”

“That’s really sweet, Ruth Ann. I’ll tell him,” Jessie smiled.

Ruth Ann smiled back as she headed out the door, making sure to put an extra swing in her sashay for Jared’s benefit. Jessie sighed as she walked down the hall toward Nicodemus and a much needed stash of chamomile tea.

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About the Author

Eli Rainwater moved from Atlanta to Durham where she lives with her three cats. She helps manage a pub, drinks way too much coffee and tea, and is really bad about things like sleep or eating real meals.

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