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BLOOD CHALLENGE, Lupi #13

# Chapter 1

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excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

Sweat trickled beneath Lily Yu's athletic bra as she circled her car, ran a clammy finger down her spine, and threatened to sting her eyes. Not that it was hot. The heat wave had finally broken, and San Diego was enjoying its customary September balminess. But the city liked to make up for a total lack of rain this time of year by brewing up high humidity, especially in the mornings. The sweat her body had pumped out during her run had nowhere to go.

She dragged her forearm across her face, smearing the wet around rather than getting rid of it, and scowled.

Werewolfs Whore.

That was spray painted in black across the hood of her government-issue Ford. The perp had forgotten the apostrophe, but he'd added a p.s. of sorts on the trunk: Fucking Bitch Traitor.

One of her neighbors? She considered that as her heartbeat settled. They had easy access, but otherwise they weren't a good fit.

The rabid haters—the ones most likely to escalate from words to actions—fell in a predictable demographic. There were exceptions, like the guy who'd killed a guard at the Holocaust Museum. He'd been nearly ninety. But chances were that the asshole who'd defaced her ride was a white, heterosexual male between the ages of twenty and sixty; and either unemployed or working a dead-end job. He probably also hated gays and immigrants, blacks and Jews – everyone he could blame for having upset “the natural order.”

The natural order would have him on top. Since he was miles and miles away from that spot, someone was clearly at fault.

Lily had plenty of neighbors who fit the age and sex demographic. Some might hate their jobs, too, but they weren't bottom-of-the-heap workers. The high-rise she lived in these days had

correspondingly high rents.

But not all haters were financially challenged. Robert Friar proved that.

Lily sighed. Hell of a way to end a good run, finding this shit. Really messed with all those endorphins she'd produced. If the perp had still been around, she might have gotten back some of that high by kicking his sorry ass, but she was alone in the parking garage . . . except for a few of her neighbors.

The Prius pulling out of its spot now belonged to a single mom on the second floor. Wendy Something. Wendy left about this time every weekday with the kids so she could drop them at day care. She worked at some back—Lily couldn't remember which one—and looked tired all the time. Hispanic. Highly unlikely to spray bad words on a car with her kids watching.

The man crossing the cement to his Lexus left around seven every weekday, too. He was in management at some alphabet-soup company. He was overweight, well-groomed, around forty, and white. Fifth floor, she thought. He was possible, but only just.

Then there was the motorcycle she'd seen tearing out of the garage as she approached it. Jack was a nice guy in a resoundingly unsuccessful band. He got the occasional modeling job, too, but could never have afforded the rent if not for his boyfriend, who had some kind of trust fund. Said boyfriend was, in Lily's opinion, an asshole, but not the sort of asshole who got up before dawn to spray-paint insults on an FBI agent's car.

It was unlikely the perp was still present, though, either heading off for work or lurking nearby to watch Lily's reaction. She kept her senses tuned anyway as she took her phone from the armband she used on a run. She used it to take a few pictures of the damage, then checked out the surveillance cameras.

Didn't seem to be damaged, so maybe they'd get a look at the asshole who'd defaced her ride. It would be nice to know for sure it wasn't anyone she shared the elevator with.

Of course, to see the images from the cameras, she'd have to tell Rule. He owned the building. Or rather, his father did, but it really belonged to the clan. Nokolai clan, that is. Rule had two clans now, and that was another source of trouble.

Lily got in the elevator and punched the button for the tenth floor. She did not want to tell Rule. Probably she'd have to, but she didn't want to. She hadn't realized how overly protective he'd gotten until the heat wave broke and she could run outside again, instead of on a treadmill.

He didn't want her running alone. At first he'd found reasons to join her, but when he couldn't he'd tried sending one or two of the guards along.

She'd put a stop to that. Sure, there'd been a situation last month when the guards had been useful, maybe even necessary. But that case, that situation, was over. His caution was excessive

and annoying, and that was half the reason she didn't want to tell him about her car.

The other half was the guilt. Rule was all too grimly certain to blame himself for the vandalism, and that was harder for her to deal with because she couldn't get mad about it. She even understood. She'd handled similar feelings herself, worrying about how their upcoming marriage would affect him. When he asked her to marry him, he'd broken a centuries-old taboo for his people.

When she accepted, she'd given the haters of the world a new target. Her.

The elevator dinged. Lily got off and turned left. Rule had a corner unit. No, they had a corner unit. It had been four months now since she let her old apartment go; longer than that since they basically started living together . . . and nearly a year since she first saw him, sitting in the cacophony and bad lighting that was Club Hell.

Nearly a year since her life changed, and changed, and changed again. Time to stop thinking of it as his place. Maybe if she bought some new pillows or a rug . . .

Two of Rule's bodyguards stood in front of the apartment door, this set being from the Leidolf contingent. She'd decided to think of them as nosy but well-intentioned neighbors--like a lot of really buff Mrs. Kravitz's, only with guns and a disconcerting willingness to lay down their lives, if necessary.

She gave them a nod as she approached. "LeBron, Eric."

"Have a good run?" the darker, beefier man asked.

"Pretty good." She didn't mention her car. That was FBI business, not a matter for either clan. Besides, she wouldn't have told her nosy neighbor about it, would she? "We're supposed to get some rain today. Think it'll happen?"

"You mean it really does rain in San Diego?" LeBron said. "I thought that was, like, a myth. Something you tell newcomers to see if they'll swallow it."

The Leidolf guards were from North Carolina—green, wet, North Carolina. She grinned. "Damn. You're onto me."

Lily used her own key on the door. Either of the men could have opened it for her, but she preferred to do that herself. She liked to think that was good sense—it left both their hands and their attention free for any sudden threats—but suspected there was a healthy dollop of denial mixed in, too. If she opened the door herself, she could pretend they didn't have keys.

It was a gorgeous apartment. That was part of the problem—nothing she could afford fit the

place. Rule had furnished it in a mix of man-modern, like the low-slung leather couches, and old wood. The crystal dish where she tossed her key sat on a two-hundred year old console table in the small entry. Her water bottle didn't exactly go with the décor, but it was handy to leave it on the table. She grabbed it, twisted, and started chugging as she walked.

The great room was the star of the show. A huge window-wall framed the combined living and dining areas. Freshly minted morning sun poured in through the glass, striking mahogany sparks from the hair of the man seated at the big, dark wood dining table.

In other lighting, Rule's hair was nearly black. In any light, it was shaggy.

She used to think that was part of his persona, the look he cultivated as the most public face of the lupi. It wasn't. He just didn't like getting his hair cut. He could get away with that, being so outrageously sexy. But she liked knowing the shaggy hair wasn't part of the persona, but part of the man.

Rule spoke without looking up from the laptop that anchored the sprawl of papers covering half the table. "I've already called in about the damage to your car."

Her feet stopped. "Ah . . . oh. Who did you call?"

"Your current comrades-in-arms. The local FBI office." Now he looked up. "You did plan to tell me about it, didn't you?"

"I was considering it. How did you find out?"

"José saw it when he was leaving on an errand."

José was another bodyguard, only from the Nokolai side. "So you called the office, but you didn't call and warn me."

Now he looked at her. "I called. You didn't answer."

Lily opened her mouth to argue—and shut it again. She stripped off the armband, took out her phone, and checked. And grimaced. "The ringer's turned off. Sorry. Who did you talk to?"

"Agent Gray. He assured me he'd send someone out right away. He wanted me to tell you that the handwriting expert confirmed that the sexually explicit letter you received last week was written by the, ah, perp you suspected. The one with a habit of writing such letters."

"It's nice to be right." The letter had been yucky, not scary. The guy who wrote it was a known quantity—not known by name, maybe, but by habit. He got off on writing dirty "love letters" to people in the news, and was sadly promiscuous in his attentions. He'd written everyone from

Brittany Spears to the First Lady. “I told you about that.”

His eyebrows—he had wicked eyebrows—lifted. “Yes, you did. Unlike the other letters you’ve received. The ones serious enough that the FBI is investigating them. Those, you haven’t mentioned.”

Busted. Damn that Gray for tattling. “Because you’d jump to conclusions. The FBI has a policy of tracking any threats its agents receive. It’s doesn’t rise to the level of an investigation, not really. Standard practice, not anything to worry about.”

“When someone threatens you, I worry.” He rose. “You will not, in some misguided effort to protect me, keep such things from me.”

Rule was one of those rare men who look elegant in anything. Maybe it was the shoulders, or the runner’s legs, or the sheer grace of the man. Today’s choices were black, as usual—black slacks with a black dress shirt with the sleeves pushed up. His feet were bare.

It was inappropriate to find those bare feet sexy when he was clearly angry. And with reason, she admitted. If their situations were reversed, she’d have been pissed. “Okay.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Okay? Just like that?”

“On one condition. We are not having the bodyguard argument again.”

He considered that a moment. “I’ll table it for now. I reserve the right to bring it up later if conditions warrant.”

“Rule, I can’t go everywhere trailing lupus bodyguards! Aside from the fun Friar would have with that story once he found out—and he would, eventually--there’s the matter of confidentiality. I can’t have civilians privy to an investigation.”

“I thought we were tabling the argument.”

She huffed out a breath. “Why, when I got what I asked for, do I feel like you won?”

His smile came quick and easy. “Because you’re a deeply suspicious woman. About those threatening letters—”

A herd of elephants galloped down the hall from the bedrooms. A second later, the herd came into view, transformed into a nine-year-old boy with dark hair and his father’s eyebrows. He was wearing his tighty whiteys—and nothing else.

Toby skidded to a stop in front of them, grinning. “I’m hungry! What’s for breakfast?” “Hamburgers,” Rule said. “But you don’t seem to be ready to eat.”

“It’s my new strategy,” Toby explained. “Hi, Lily. You’re all sweaty.”

“I am,” she agreed, baffled by the feeling that rose inside her. How could she feel this way about a boy she’d known such a short time? “I need a shower.”

“I had mine last night. That’s part of my strategy. See, when Dad tells me to get up I lay out all my clothes, but I don’t put them on until after I eat. This way I don’t have to worry about spilling stuff on them. Well, except for my underwear, but if I spill something on them it won’t show.”

Rule nodded thoughtfully. “I believe that would be called a tactic, not a strategy. A tactic is the immediate means used to achieve a goal. Strategy is the overarching vision of how to employ tactics and other assets to achieve a goal.”

“Yeah?” Toby considered that. “So my strategy is keeping my clothes clean, and my tactic is not wearing them when I eat.”

“Precisely. Unfortunately, that tactic only works at home.”

“Well, yeah! The kids at school would think I was pretty weird if I stripped in the cafeteria at lunchtime.”

“Which makes this tactic ineffective, I’m afraid. The overall goal is for you to learn to keep food from decorating you.”

Toby’s face fell. “You mean I gotta get dressed.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I don’t have to get dressed before breakfast when I stay with Grandpa.”

Grandpa was Rule’s father, Isen Turner—the Nokolai Rho. Toby had stayed with him at Clanhome until school started.

“That was summer vacation,” Rule said firmly. “The rules are different once school starts.”

That was a telling argument. The boy had been raised by his maternal grandmother, Louise Asteglio, until two months ago, when Rule was finally able to gain custody. Lily knew Louise had insisted on dressing before breakfast during the school year.

Toby’s face fell. “But—”

“Toby.”

Toby heaved a sigh, then brightened slightly. “Hamburgers?”

Rule nodded.

“Are you gonna make one for Lily, too?”

She answered that one. “I ate before I went for my run. It’s not a good idea to exercise on empty.”

“Yeah, but . . . hamburgers. For breakfast.”

That hadn’t happened back in North Carolina at his grandmother’s house. It hadn’t happened at Lily’s home when she was growing up in San Diego, either. Rule was keeping some of Mrs. Asteglio’s rules, both because they worked and because he thought the continuity would help Toby adapt. But he saw no objection to burgers for breakfast. Even a fully human boy needs protein in the morning, he’d said.

And Toby wasn’t fully human. He was lupus, though he wouldn’t turn wolf until he hit puberty. Lupi needed extra protein even before the Change.

“I don’t think I have time,” Lily said. “I’ve got to take my shower and get dressed, or I won’t get you to school before the bell rings.” Dropping Toby off at school was her idea. Rule could have done it. Any of the guards would have been happy to—and might need to sometimes, when her job got crazy. But Lily liked having those few minutes with Toby in the car, just the two of them.

Toby nodded. “Dad can make you one to take with you. Hey, Dad!” Excitement overtook him. “Did you tell her about—”

“Not yet,” Rule said, “and it’s my surprise, so go get dressed before you ruin it.”

Toby giggled, shot Lily a mischievous look and raced off.

Lily shook her head in wonder. “He’s sure riding a high of some sort this morning. Rule, about this surprise--”

At the same time he said, “About those letters—”

They looked at each other. Smiled. “Okay,” she said, “the letters came up first, so we’ll hit that, but fast. I do need to shower.”



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