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MORTAL TIES, Lupi #16

# *Chapter 1*

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excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

Lily Yu hadn't planned to visit the graveyard at sunset. It just worked out that way.

Mount Hope's main gates closed at three-thirty, but the pedestrian gates stayed open. People liked to stop by after work, the guy at the cemetery's office had said, especially on the deceased's birthday or other important dates. No parking available at this hour, though, except for what you could grab along the street.

Lily pulled her government-issue Ford to the curb and checked her rearview mirror. The white Toyota that had been following her drew close, then cruised on by. She would wait. No point in making them anxious by getting out before they could park. It was bad enough she brought them here when the light was going. Not that they would be spooked by the setting, no more than she was. The dead weren't scary. It was the living you had to watch out for.

While the Toyota hunted a parking place, Lily transferred her penlight from her purse to her pocket. The day was slipping down towards dusk, and twilight's a tricky bugger. In the daytime you know where you are and can see where you're going. At night you know you can't see, not without help—electric help, most likely, from the city, a flashlight, whatever. You know, so you take precautions.

Twilight blurs the edges. In the shadow time, it's easy to mistake what you see, to step wrong, thinking there's light enough to keep going. Back when she worked homicide, Lily had arrested people who went that one terrible step too far, confused by a personal twilight of drugs or emotion. People who never set out to be killers.

But some take that step on purpose. Some damn well know where the lines are, and cross them deliberately. Like the bastard whose hearing she'd testified at today.

Goddamn copycats.

The Toyota backed itself into a spot between an SUV and a pickup halfway up the block. Lily grabbed her purse, checked for cars, and climbed out of her Ford. Traffic was sparse enough she could cross right away, so she did. By the time she reached the cemetery side of the street, two men had gotten out of the Toyota.

One was slim and pale, with a round face and glasses. He looked like he ought to have a pocket protector tucked away somewhere. The other was a head taller, eighty pounds heavier, and looked like he ought to have a couple tattoos and a rap sheet. Geek Guy wore a cheap sports shirt. Tough Guy wore a black t-shirt. Both wore jeans, athletic shoes, and sports jackets.

Lily wore a jacket, too, and for the same reason. It might be a few days short of January, but this was San Diego. The air was crisp, not cold. But people get upset if you walk around with your shoulder harness showing.

The men crossed the street between a dark sedan and a delivery truck. Geek Guy made a quick gesture with one hand. Tough Guy set off through the gate at an easy lope. Lily followed Tough Guy—also known as Mike—and was in turn followed.

They hadn't been tailed here, but it was just barely possible their enemies knew she planned to come and had someone waiting. Highly unlikely, but possible. A month ago she'd picked up a map of the cemetery. Theoretically Friar could have somehow learned about that and kept the place staked out ever since.

Or so Scott had said when she told him she was coming here. Lily considered this one of the safest things she'd done lately. Friar's organization had been badly damaged in October when he'd managed to get a lot of people killed, but had seen his long-laid plans blow up in his face. She doubted he had the resources to keep a sniper in place 24/7 for a month. She doubted even more that he had any idea she'd picked up that map in the first place.

He did, however, have one resource they could neither predict nor evaluate in any meaningful way, so she could be wrong. If so, well, she had backup.

Sometimes it really is all in the name.

For months she'd struggled with the need for bodyguards. No—be honest, she told herself as she set off down a narrow road that twisted through the cemetery, heading generally where she needed to go. She'd hated it. She'd hated dragging guards everywhere, hated the loss of privacy. . . hated, most of all, that one of them had given his life for her. The need for them was real, but her acceptance of necessity had been a grim thing, testy and prone to muttering.

Last week Rule had shaken his head at her mutters and said, "I don't get it. Didn't you ever call for backup when you were a regular cop? That didn't make you crazy."

“Backup,” she’d repeated slowly. Then said it again as a weight shifted, not disappearing but settling into a more comfortable place, like slipping on her shoulder holster. “Backup, not guards. They’re my mobile backup.”

Trailed by half of her mobile backup—a.k.a. Geek Guy, a.k.a. Scott White, who was a lot more interested in guns and knives than computers--Lily left the road for the soft grass, moving between the resting places of the dead.

Her target lay in the newest part of the cemetery. Mount Hope was old for this side of the country, an accumulation of graveyards the city had assumed responsibility for over the years, with lots of established trees and old-fashioned headstones. Here, though, it was what they called garden-style, with neatly trimmed grass and markers set flat into the ground, each with a little holder for flowers.

The grass was damp and springy and perfumed the air. In other parts of the country, people associated the smell of freshly cut grass with summer. It evoked winter for Lily. That’s when the rains came, when grass grew lush and green and in need of cutting. This year December had been unusually wet, bestowing over five inches of rain on them. Lily walked on soft grass between the graves of people she’d never known, heading for the one she had.

She hadn’t brought flowers. It would be tacky to bring flowers to the grave of a woman you’d killed. Especially when you didn’t regret it.

Lily counted rows, turned, and counted graves. She didn’t see Mike nearby, but she hadn’t expected to. Lupi were good at tucking themselves away where you couldn’t spot them.

And there it was. Lily stopped.

She hadn’t brought flowers, but someone had.

Not an expensive bouquet. More like the kind you pick up at the grocery store, with a few dyed carnations supplemented by baby’s breath. Pink and red carnations, in this case. There was an inch of water in the glass cylinder holding the bouquet.

Was this the right grave? Maybe she’d lost count. She knelt by the headstone laid flat into the ground, frowned at its unexpected decoration, then used her penlight to read the inscription on the plaque: HELEN ANNABELLE WHITEHEAD.

When Lily killed Helen a year ago last month, she hadn’t known the woman’s last name. She hadn’t known much about her at all, save for a few vital facts. Helen had lived up to the common wisdom about telepaths--she’d been batwing crazy. She’d tortured and she’d killed; she’d tried to open a hellgate; she’d intended to feed Lily’s lover to the Old One she served. She’d also been doing her damndest to kill Lily just before Lily put a stop to that and the rest of her plans.

So . . . no regrets, no. Lily had done what she had to do. And Helen hadn't had a spouse, lover, or any living family, so Lily didn't even carry the burden of having brought grief to those who might have loved the woman.

Yet here she was. She wasn't sure why. In some murky, underneath way it was connected to what she'd done yesterday, when she and Rule had stood in line for a ridiculous amount of time at the County Clerk's office. They'd left with a marriage license good for the next ninety days.

The wedding was in March—two months, one week, and two days away.

Yesterday had been the immediate catalyst for this visit, but the decision to come here had grown up organically in Lily's mind over the last several months. She'd found out where Helen was back in June, but hadn't come. Last month she'd swung by Mount Hope's office and gotten directions and the map, but hadn't gone to Helen's grave. She hadn't been ready.

Ready for what? She wasn't sure. She was here, and she still wasn't sure.

Mount Hope had been San Diego's municipal cemetery for about a hundred and fifty years. Raymond Chandler was buried here. So was Alta Hulett, America's first female attorney, and the guy who established Balboa Park, and a lot of veterans. So was Ah Quin, who was remembered as one of the city's founding fathers . . . at least by its Chinese residents. And so were those who'd been buried at the county's expense, though budget cuts meant the county was likely to cremate, not plant, these days.

Helen had died a virgin, a killer, and intestate, but taxpayers hadn't had to pick up the tab for disposing of her mortal remains. The trustee appointed by a judge had seen to that, paying for it out of her estate.

Turned out Helen had socked away well over a quarter million. Telepaths had an inside track on conning people, didn't they? If they could shut out the voices in their heads enough to function, that is—which Helen had been able to do, thanks to the Old One she served. That's how she'd met her protégée, Patrick Harlowe . . . who'd also died badly, but not at Lily's hands. Cullen Seabourne had done the honors there.

But Lily had killed again since then. Helen was her first, but killing and war went together, didn't they? Even if most of the country didn't know they were at war, the lupi did. Lily did. And so did her boss, head of the FBI's Unit Twelve . . . head, too, of the far less official Shadow Unit.

In the run-up to the war, Lily had killed demons, helped a wraith reach true death, and ushered a supposed immortal through that small, dark door. This last September she'd tried and failed to kill a sidhe lord. And in October, just before in the first open battle of the war, she'd shot a man. Double-tapped him.

That man had just shot a fellow FBI agent—a lying, treacherous bastard of an agent, but at that point he'd been on Lily's side. There had been other lives on the line: four lupi, another FBI agent, and the twenty-two people the bad guys intended to slaughter. Lily had sited on the shooter's head--his body had been blocked by the van he'd driven --and squeezed off two quick shots. She'd killed him cold, not hot, killed him to stop him from killing others.

That was training. Most cops never had to use their weapons, but when you took up the badge you knew you might be called on to take a life. Lily had never doubted she could. Not since she was eight, anyway. The man who'd raped and killed her friend while she watched, tied up and waiting for him to do the same to her, had been arrested and tried and convicted. He'd gone to prison for life, which was all the vengeance she was supposed to want.

But for months afterward, she'd dreamed of murder.

Lily had always known she entered the police force to stop the monsters. She was beginning to understand the other reason she'd needed that bureaucratic harness.

“Goddamn morbid sort of thing to do, isn't it?” said a gravelly voice. “Hanging out at the grave of someone you killed.”

Lily jolted, then twisted to scowl at the intruder. “Oh, hell. I thought you were gone.”

“Guess you were wrong.” The man standing disrespectfully atop a nearby grave wore a dark suit with a wrinkled white shirt and a plain tie. He was on the skinny side of lean, with his dark, thinning hair combed straight back from a broad forehead, and he was pale. Pale as in white. Also slightly see-through.

Al Drummond. Her very own personal haunt.



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