(And the Sun goes Down) About Three in the Day

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Summary

US Deputy Marshal Raylan Givens searches for a way to control the growing power of his necromancy ignited by his forced symbiotic metaphysical tie to vampire master Boyd Crowder. Meanwhile, his lover, fellow vampire executioner, and P-SOG Deputy Marshal Tim Gutterson, seeks to find a way to free Raylan from his bond with Boyd, once and for all.
"About Three in the Day" is the next book after "Into the Mouth of this Holler." See the series tag; this really isn't a stand-alone.

This is a fusion of the characters from "Justified" playing around in the world (and with some characters) from Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake series. No Anita or Jean Claude here, sorry.

I don't own any of these characters, clearly. All the fics in this series pay tribute to the works of Elmore Leonard, Graham Yost, and Hamilton. Title is a nod to Darrell Scott's song "You'll Never Leave Harlan Alive," which means something wholly different when you include vampires in the mix.

I will try to drop in trigger warnings, but expect to find themes and content dealing with ongoing non-consent issues and some PTSD associated with a past rape.

Finally, but absolutely not last nor least, I would like to thank Jonjo for beta-reading and giving me wonderful feedback on the book outline and the coming chapters. You all would be so confused in places without her. Trust me on that. :)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Raylan Givens has always had questionable taste in women, and now that he's thinking about it, his track record with men might not have been a whole lot better.

Normally that wouldn’t have bothered him because up until about three minutes ago he thought all that had changed with his new beau. Tim was different from anyone he’d been with before. With Tim, Raylan thought he’d left the short-lived romances with slightly shady women and one-off gay-bar hookups behind. He actually thought he was working his way through the clichés of falling in love: the tide had turned; he'd met his match; he'd found “the One.”

An equal. A partner. And at the moment, an idiot.

Raylan shook his head and held out one finger—unsure if he was censuring Tim or gesturing for him to repeat himself.

“Run that last bit by me again?”

Tim took a long chug of milk out of the jug before putting it back into the fridge, then he pulled out a bottle of water before hip checking the door more forcibly than he needed to. “I’m thinking I should turn.”

“Into…” Raylan waved his hand.

Tim’s face was set in stony defiance where it had been hopeful a few moments before when he came back in from a morning run. They’d flown into Santa Fe from Lexington the night before, and Tim got up to run at six-thirty in the morning Kentucky time—which was two hours ahead of the local time. His giant dog Sheeba trailed in the door after him, lapped up a bowl of water, and flopped in front of a hearth in the bedroom to escape the tense mood building between them.

“Into a vampire,” Tim finished, tightly. He twisted the cap off the water.

Raylan nodded. Yep, vampire was what he thought he’d heard.

“You do remember we hunt vampires, right? They call you Death, they call me the Executioner?”

Tim stopped just short of rolling his eyes and propped his butt against the kitchen counter. “This is so not going how I thought it would.”

Raylan scowled. “And how was that?”

“A lot better than this.”

Raylan half-laughed, then shook his head. He could smell Tim’s anger in the air—the ability to scent emotions a gift from Boyd Crowder’s laying the first two of four vampire marks on him that would lead to Raylan becoming Boyd’s human servant. That night, Tim informed him he needed to be prepared for the day when Tim would put Boyd down—as soon as he figured out how to free Raylan. Maybe Raylan shouldn't have been surprised when his lover, a vampire executioner with a kill count that rivaled his own, informed him that he wanted to become a vampire himself. Up to that morning, Tim’s anger had been a cold, determined undercurrent.

This morning though, Raylan tried not to think about the taste of Tim’s anger in the back of his throat—like a burnt marshmallow held too long, too close to a flame. Black and crunchy, gooey and
“Why would you even consider that an option?” Raylan asked.

Tim had a pained expression on his face, and he shifted against the counter, swallowing a swig of water. “Well, you, that’s why. Even after I kill Boyd, what’s to stop some other vampire from stepping in and marking you?”

“Shielding, right? I thought that’s why you dragged me out to the far ends of the Earth,” Raylan said. A chunk of their time in New Mexico had been set aside for Raylan to work with Nahtoo on strengthening his mental shields. It was a necessary defensive move but a long shot for how effective it would be in the long run once they’d freed Raylan of Boyd. And Raylan thought that Tim suspected that, too.

“How do we even know if that will work against vampire marks? You couldn’t stop Boyd or Bo from putting the first marks on you,” Tim said.

Bo Crowder had forced Raylan into becoming his human servant and killing Bo had nearly killed Raylan because of the metaphysical connection between a vampire master and his human servant was symbiotic. Raylan would have died had another vampire, Bo’s son Boyd, not stepped in and marked Raylan the same way—only stopping at two of the four marks required to seal the bond. Raylan had no intention of letting Boyd get the other two marks in, but was at a loss as to how to free himself from the connection the vampire had created by marking him. Maybe Tim had a point, he thought, taking a deep breath.

Raylan sighed, still not liking the idea. “And you think that your becoming my vampire master will just fix everything?”

“It’d get us a lot closer than we are now,” Tim said. “Better to be bound to me than to keep risking your death when we put down the next vamp who thinks all that’s missing from life is a pet necromancer.”

Raylan didn’t reply, but raised his eyebrows. “That’s not how I imagined someone proposing to share his life with me.”

“At least I asked first,” Tim muttered.

“What was that?” Raylan said.

“You seem less upset about being bound to Boyd than you do about the prospect of…” Tim stopped and waved his hand back and forth between them. “Us,” Tim finished.

“Because what you’re proposing isn’t ‘us.’” Raylan fanned his hand mimicking Tim’s gesture. “It’s you playing hero.”

“You don’t typically complain about that.”

Raylan fought a smile. “As I recall, Miami comes to mind.”

“That turned you on.”

“And you think this should have that same effect?”

Tim might have been weighing an answer. Raylan wasn’t sure, but he pushed ahead. “For what it’s worth, it does—just not for the reasons you think,” Raylan admitted.
“Oh, yeah?” The crease between Tim’s eyebrows was pinched and deep.

“Beside the point,” Raylan said. “What if you didn’t survive the process? Even if you do, you have to put down a master vamp to steal his powers.”

“I’ve taken down master vampires before.”

“Not by drinking them.”

Raylan watched Tim’s forehead scrunch up and perpendicular creases deepen over the dimple between his brows reflecting the level of his partner’s frustration.

“See? Do you even want to have to drink… people? Every day?”

Tim pushed off the counter leaving his water bottle behind on the counter and wandered out the front door to the porch, standing rigid with his arms crossed. He was wearing a pair of those black Ranger PT shorts that haunted Raylan’s dreams, a long-sleeved Henley, and running shoes. Raylan followed him out cringing at the cold stones under his bare feet. The floor tiles in the guest house were heated.

He tucked in behind Tim, wrapping his arms around his pissed-off lover to both calm him and burrow into his body heat. The early morning air was cool… maybe in the mid-forties. Raylan shivered, his body still acclimated to years spent in south Florida where the temperature only hit that low in the dead of winter.

The sun had painted a golden-red to the underside of the few clouds that rode over the mountains to the east side of the valley where Tim’s ranch sprawled. The rest of the sky brightened to a brilliant blue and light spilled down over the mountains. Tim told him the night before they weren’t far from the Santa Fe National Forest. Raylan thought the mountains smelled different in New Mexico than they did in Kentucky. The elevation was too high for the terrain to be called desert and too low in places on the property to be considered wooded. In truth, Raylan liked mountains here for their differences. He pushed away a sense of dread that they’d eventually be going back to Kentucky. He thought these mountains felt masculine with their sandy-brown earth speckled with dark green conifers overlaid with the smell of sage and piñon. And suited Tim.

“Nice view,” Raylan murmured.

Tim grunted in agreement. Raylan buried his nose in Tim’s neck breathing in the warm salt of his perspiration. He’d gone for a long run that morning.

“I like you alive and all warm,” Raylan said. He traced his tongue over the two moles on the right side of Tim’s neck aligned against each other like a vampire bite, then he sucked on the span of skin between them drawing a bruise to the surface.

“What’re you doin’?” Tim’s tone seemed a protest. But he tipped his head slightly to the left, stretching out the curve of his neck to give Raylan better access.

Raylan sucked harder, tracing his tongue in a figure eight around the two moles until Tim started to squirm, then Raylan placed a chaste kiss behind his ear, letting his left hand fall to Tim’s hip. He slipped his fingers up under the outer layer of Tim’s shorts, his fingers searching along the edge of their liner. “Mad smells real good on you for some reason.”

Tim turned in his arms, facing Raylan down. “I’m serious about this. About turning.”

“I know you are,” Raylan said. “But I don’t want this for you. Or me. Or us.”
“I just don’t see how—”

“There’s got to be another way.”

Tim shook his head, his eyes bleak. Raylan realized that Tim’s hopelessness smelled so much like an unripe persimmon that his mouth puckered. Raylan was six again for a moment, hearing his mama in his ear tell him he had to know the taste of that particular kind of bitterness to learn patience. He never pulled a wild persimmon from a tree branch again, but waited for them to fall, walking the fence line each autumn with an old pie plate picking the ripe ones up from the grass. Raylan shook off the memory.

“Please just wait,” Raylan whispered. “We’ll figure something else out. Just wait.”

Tim didn’t answer, but he also didn’t argue.

“C’mon. It’s too early,” he added, changing the subject. “Either back to bed or show me where you hide the coffee.” Raylan snagged the front of his shirt and pulled him back toward the house.

“They’ll have breakfast down at the main house…”

“It’ll be there when we get ’round to it?”

Tim followed him instead of answering. Sheeba gave up the bedroom to them, not any more interested in their new mood. Eventually, she abandoned the little adobe house altogether, making Tim leave Raylan waiting in the bed while he padded to the door to let her out.

“She’s probably off to the stables for breakfast,” Tim said before Raylan found a way to shut him up.

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Raylan didn’t dislike Peter, the man who ran the ranch, but he couldn’t own to liking him either. It wasn’t because he was clearly someone important in Tim’s life. Before Raylan fled the ranch house the night before, he’d seen pictures of a younger Tim with Peter on a mantle: some with other men, all dressed in Army fatigues, and another with just the two of them somewhere on the ranch, Raylan assumed.

The night before Raylan claimed exhaustion and escaped to the little adobe house up the hill from the main ranch house where he and Tim were staying.

But the truth was Peter made Raylan want to panic. He was less than excited when Tim grinned and tugged him along toward the horse stables that morning saying, “Pete said he’s working with puppies this morning.”

Raylan didn’t understand his reaction to Peter, but Tim didn’t smell like anger anymore. Maybe it was the big breakfast. More likely it was the extra hour in bed. Either way, the anger was gone so Raylan followed him down to the stables where Tim said Peter trained their brood of Trollhound crossbreeds to work as K-9 police dogs with preternatural units.

“Sheeba was our first,” Tim explained. “She’s kind of an accidental rescue. Rangers sent me to assist on a stateside hunt down in Louisiana—rogue werelions. Her trainer—Denis-Luc St. John—had a pack of Trollhounds purebreds and crossbreeds he used to track wereanimals—still does, in fact. Standard police dogs and scent dogs get too spooked to track preternatural beings. But Trollhounds’re fearless.”

“ Heard of St. John. Word is he holds the record for the highest number of kills for wereanimals,”
Raylan said. “Yeah, well, I don’t know how many of those are his kills or because of his hounds. He dumped Sheeba after she was injured tracking one of the werelions. Just tossed her away.”

Raylan knocked his shoulder into Tim’s as they walked in the direction of where the stables and K-9 training facilities and courses were set up further down into the valley. If they were in Kentucky, they’d have called it a holler. “But you picked her up?”

“She was pregnant. It’s why she didn’t heal,” Tim said. “So me and Pete had a pile of Trollhound puppies in a one-bedroom condo.”

“Close quarters.” Raylan had guessed there’d been something between Tim and Peter.

“Condo association didn’t view Trollhounds, even mixed breeds, as acceptable domestic pets.”

“How’d you get this place?” Raylan said, curious.

“Family money that I really didn’t know what else to do with. My father died before we made it through basic. Pete lost his leg and was discharged a few months before. My furlough was dwindling. By that time, the will had been argued over and dispersed,” Tim said.

“How did he lose his leg?” Raylan said, he’d noticed Peter’s limp but didn’t realize the extent of the man’s injury.

“We served together.”

Raylan nodded, figuring that was answer enough. “Where’d the family money come from?” Raylan had been taken aback by the size of the ranch and the fact that Tim not only had money, but apparently a lot of it.

“Texas varmit laws were… let’s just say expansive thirty, forty years back. He made a lot of money hunting down people we’d leave in peace today,” Tim said. “My father hated that I enlisted. He never understood why I would kill for a higher purpose than money.”

“A fan of Thomas then, your dad?”

“Thomas only took contracts on bad monsters,” Tim said, indignant. Raylan knew that. Tim had been on a contract as “Thomas” after Tommy Bucks in Nicaragua when they met. Tim told him Thomas started as a deep cover persona created by the government for assignments they’d rather not associate with the Rangers. Raylan thought that joining the marshals service had been Tim’s way of retiring Thomas. That was until he watched Tim use the cover to call in a favor allowing them to place Nahtoo at the ranch.

“This is a lot of land just to train dogs,” Raylan said.

“The way the terrain changes between the valley and the mountains gives us options to vary training without freaking out people by taking the dogs out in public every time we want to teach them something new. We have grass, desert, mountains, a couple different water features—a stream and a pond. Pete’s built up training courses around the property.”

They were approaching the stables and Raylan spied a line of broken-down cars lined up side-by-side. “Demolition derby cars?”

“Vehicle course for training search dogs.”
“Nice.”

“Dual-purpose trained K-9s with at least one specialty in preternatural tracking or attack run fifty grand to start. That includes putting up the handlers for a month-long training.”

“You’re going to have people running in and out with Nahtoo here?” Raylan said.

Tim waved him off. “She’ll have to encounter people wherever she lives, Raylan. I had Pete put her in the North Casita. No training courses on that end of the property. The dorm house and classroom are at the other end. Pete’s real picky about who he sells the hounds to. Besides, the handlers we let in are all vetted LEOs.”

“Some things don’t show up in vetting.”

“Well, good thing Nahtoo can read minds then,” Tim said, tugging Raylan by the wrist toward a horse barn.

They found Nahtoo working with Peter and a group of five puppies in a barn where horse stables had been converted into dog kennels. An adult German Shepherd was herding puppies back into the fold when they wandered too far away from where Peter was teaching Nahtoo how to train them to sit.

“What kind of puppies?” Raylan asked.

Peter waved them forward. “Trollhound and German Shepherd. We crossbreed the hounds with a domestic dog breed with strong tracking or protective instincts. They bond with their handlers better and still hang onto the Trollhound’s preternatural senses.”

Raylan nodded and squatted down to pet a pup with a green collar.

“Teem!” Nahtoo said, and went over to hug him, grabbing his face to kiss his cheek. “I love mi casita.”

Peter was forcing another puppy to plop his hind quarters down into a sitting position—using something between his fingers to make the puppy stretch up, then back into a sit, rewarding the dog with whatever was pinched between his fingers.

Raylan’s stomach turned, and he stood up backing away, feeling intensely like he no longer wanted to be there. Tim’s head turned, focusing on Raylan.

Nahtoo held her hand out to Peter and he handed her a chunk of something from a pouch around his waist. She broke off a small piece and coerced a puppy with a red collar into a sitting position.

Raylan inhaled and smelled liver. Until encountering Peter, he hadn’t been around any since Bo’d held him against his will.

“I’m… uh… think I’ll look around?” Raylan muttered. The tan German Shepherd with a black saddle patch that had been herding the puppies back to the center of the group changed courses and zeroed in on Raylan, leaning into his legs stretching up to be touched, petted.

“What?” Raylan asked—unsure if he was asking the question of the dog or Peter and Tim. But he stroked the dog’s head.

Peter’s expression was puzzled watching the interaction, then his face relaxed. “Good boy, Rufus,” he said. “There’s a training course behind the stables that’s worth a look, Raylan. Rufus take a
walk.”

Raylan found himself being herded toward the door by the tan dog. Tim followed Raylan out to one of the training areas. Some of it was built with wood, while other structures were constructed with what looked like PVC pipes. Ladders, seesaws, tubes. Raylan stroked the big head of who he guessed was Rufus.

“You okay?” Tim said.

“The liver got the better of me.”

“Ah gotcha. Organ meat has the strongest scent for the dogs. Good for training treats when they’re first learning commands.”

“I never liked the stuff. When Bo kidnapped me, I ate it because it was all that was available. Bo’s connection made me enjoy it… which now makes me want to throw up.” Rufus whined again and leaned into Raylan’s leg.

“Something to talk to Dr. North about,” Tim said.

“Finally, a trigger. She’ll be thrilled.”

Tim half-laughed. “I doubt that.”

“What’s up with this dog… Rufus is his name?” Raylan said.

“He’s probably a service dog, PTSD by his response,” Tim said. “You had a reaction and he acted to either calm you or get you out of there.”

Raylan scratched behind Rufus’ ears.

“I thought the ranch specialized in preternatural search dogs.”

“Yeah… we tend to use male German Shepherds with different strengths to sire puppies with our Trollhound bitches.”

“Bitches?”

Tim scowled. “Girl dogs.”

“I know that. I meant why only Trollhound mamas.”

“We found out the hard way that domestic dogs can’t carry Trollhound crossbreeds to term,” Tim said, “and live.” His lips were pressed tight and his browed furrowed. “A PTSD service dog would be a good match with a pureblood Trollhound.”

Tim moved closer and Raylan stiffened. “You smell like it too.”

“What? Oh… Nahtoo must have had liver on her hands when she touched me.”

“Can’t stand that smell on you,” Raylan said, his stomach tightening and his big breakfast threatened to revisit him.

“Let’s go back up to the casita, and we can take a shower. I need to head into the marshals’ office in town. Wanna come with?”
“Always up for checking out another marshals’ office. Won’t be working with Nahtoo today with her smelling like that anyway,” Raylan said.

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Since she needed a full night to recover from shifting into her weredragon form and then back, Raylan and Nahtoo decided on a few days broken up over Raylan and Tim’s ten-day stay when they would work on his shields.

Their first day, Nahtoo wanted to work on the back porch of the little adobe casita she was staying in. As they progressed, they spread out around the valley on the north end of the property. Another day was next to a pond and the last day they took a picnic and Raylan hiked up the rocky outcroppings overlooking the Nahtoo’s casita. She along behind or ahead of him, trying his shields. Her reasoning was if she tried to break into Raylan’s head to pick through his thoughts while he was doing something other than trying to stop her, he would be better able to defend himself. The trick for Raylan had been finding the happy medium where he could keep her out of his thoughts and still hear when she was thinking something in his direction.

“I think you are stronger now. I could only break through twice on the hike up,” Nahtoo told him when they stopped to eat. “And I was trying hard.”

Raylan opened a plastic container of sliced grilled chicken breasts and put it out for Nahtoo. They’d figured out over the week that the more protein they gave her during the day, the less she had to sleep to recover from their day together on top of two shifts.

He took a bite of one of his turkey sandwiches. Something about New Mexico made Raylan ravenous. “Do you really think this would stop a vampire from trying to mark me?”

Nahtoo didn’t think anything in Raylan’s direction for a while.

“I think you can stop them from trying to enter your thoughts. This marking. I think you need to talk with someone with your own kind of magic.”

Raylan locked down on his thoughts, but not quickly enough.

“Why does that makes you sad, Necromancer?”

Raylan sighed. “My Aunt Helen is the only relative I know from the Grant line, and she helped Arlo hand me over to Bo.” He was more upset by her betrayal than Arlo’s.

“Maybe there’s someone else? If you want to know your kind of magic, you need to learn from someone who knows it.”

It wasn’t what he’d hoped for, but he knew it was something he had to pursue when they went back.

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Working with Nahtoo didn’t just drain her, it wore down Raylan’s energy too. The nights when he finished working with her he went to bed not long after dinner.

While Raylan was sleeping off a session with Nahtoo, Tim finished going through his weapon cache in the main house packing what he wanted to take back with him to Kentucky.

Peter’s shadow crept across the floor from the doorway.
“Hey Pete,” Tim said, not bothering to look up.

“You’re so creepy when you do that.”

“I heard you coming—pattern of your steps.”

“You’re packing like a man who’s moving out.”

Tim nodded. “Yeah.”

“Are you coming back? To live here? To visit?”

“Well, a lot of my arsenal is still here…” Tim started and when he didn’t hear a reply, he shifted his eyes to Peter’s face and realized he’d misstepped. “You mean, am I coming back here to live?” Tim sighed. “No. But you knew that.”

“I did.”

“I met with the chief in Kentucky… going to stick with Raylan for now and bring back Sheeba as a K-9 preternatural patrol dog. I put in a request for a transfer in Santa Fe the other day.”

“What do you want to do about the house and the ranch?”

“Nothing. Keep it as it is. It’s yours, too.”

“It’s really not.”

“We’re business partners. The business is here. It’s yours.”

“Tim, I can’t just keep your ranch—”

“Don’t keep it… just run it then. You spent more time here than I ever did. And the K-9 program has a good rep now. Besides, just because we’re not together anymore doesn’t mean someone wouldn’t try for you. There’s still a small country or two where Thomas is a wanted man. It’s safer here than anywhere else you’d find. The wards are top-notch. You’ve got the guard patrol dogs at night. Just… do me a favor and let Nahtoo stay as long as she wants to.”

“Like that’s a hardship,” Peter said.

“She’s a beautiful woman,” Tim offered.

“If you like that kind of thing,” Peter said.

“Don’t care either way, but you do,” Tim said and hiked an eyebrow at his ex.

Peter blushed.

“You know, she’d be able to talk to the dogs in her were form.”

Peter’s attention shifted focus. “You should have led with that when you asked me to take her in.”

“Getting slow there Pete, what did you think she and Raylan were doing to work on his shields?”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that. Be interesting to see how she could work that into training the K-9s.”

“Well, you’ll have to see if she’s willing,” Tim said.
“Uh-huh. She was into training the puppies.”

“Just no more liver ’til we’re gone.”

Peter cringed. “Sorry about that…”

“No need. We didn’t know. You can’t predict when shit comes back on you. You know how it is.”

Peter nodded, unconsciously shifting his weight more firmly on his good leg.

“Listen, I’m not sure when or if I’ll be able to get back here,” Tim said. “The lawyers have had something in place for a while if something happens…”

“Tim, what would happen?”

Tim didn’t answer. “On the job… or something.”

“Tim.”

“And… I’m sorry. I know I was a shitty boyfriend when we were together. Always gone. Even after the Rangers, I was gone a lot—no, too much—on Thomas jobs, then it was the marshals P-SOG assignments. I didn’t really do shit to help with the business…”

“Don’t. Don’t go there.”

“Need to say it.”

“Not really. So, the cowboy… is he all you thought he’d be?” Peter asked, pushing a topic change.

Tim tried not to smile, but the way he pursed his lips gave him dead away. “Yeah.”

“Easy on the eyes,” Peter said.

Tim nodded and did smile. “Yeah.”

“Got some wear on him though.”

Tim scowled. “I like the… mileage.”

“I didn’t mean his age.”

“Me either. He’s tough. I like that about him, too.”

“Uh-huh. Well, you’ll always have a home here if you need it,” Peter said. “Even if you do own it.”

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Raylan watched Tim run through an obstacle course with Sheeba. After spending a week around the hounds and dogs on the ranch, he could recognize the Trollhound in Sheeba. She had the long snout and tall pointed ears of a German Shepherd. When she signaled something to Tim, her alert stance caused the mane around her neck to thicken and the dorsal crest of long hair that ran down her spine stiffened to stand straight up, like a Mohawk running down her back.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Peter said, joining Raylan at the fence.

“What’s the point of the hair standing up on end?” Raylan asked.
“Researchers think it makes them look bigger and more threatening.”

“She’s already huge,” Raylan said. Sheeba’s back came up to Tim’s waist when she stood at a heel.

Peter nodded. “She weighs about a buck-eighty.”

“Sheeba looks like she’s part German Shephard.”

Peter nodded. “We ran DNA on her once we started training her line to place with K-9 units—came back a quarter. Three-fourths Trollhound.”

“I had a dog once.”

“Once.”

“As a kid.”

“What happened?”

Raylan didn’t answer. “So you’ve known Tim a long time?”

“We met in basic,” Peter said. “And you’re the Miami cowboy I’ve heard so much about.”

Raylan shot Peter a look. “Good things, I hope.”

Peter snorted. “Too good. We broke up after that trip.”

Raylan winced. “Sorry if I stepped on any toes.”

“No, not at all. He’d been pulling away a while before that,” Peter said, pausing. “Since some job in Central America. He came back wanting to join the marshals service.”

“Oh.”

Peter must have noticed his tone because he side-eyed Raylan.

“I am sorry then.”

“Oh, that was you too?” Peter asked.

“Not intentionally. Listen, nothing happened…” Raylan said.

Peter shook his head and smiled a little. “Nothing would. Not with Tim.”

“Good to know.”

Peter eyed Raylan. “When Tim worked as Thomas… he changed.”

“You know about Thomas?”

“As much as a civilian can.”

Raylan nodded.

“Being Thomas changed him. Not for the better. He became closed-off, cold, empty when he wasn’t on the job. If he didn’t care so much for the dogs, I woulda sworn he’d become a sociopath or something.”
Raylan turned to Peter, shocked and more than a little put out at how casually he’d thrown the word around. “That’s a hell of a thing to say about a friend. Tim is not a sociopath.”

Peter gave Raylan measured look.

“No. Always kept his moral compass, but he got harder and harder to reach emotionally. After central America though, Thomas went away and Tim started being Tim again.”

Raylan wasn’t sure he agreed with Peter’s take. He’d met Tim when he was working as Thomas, and to Raylan—there’d been no difference. Besides he wasn’t sure Peter understood what a sociopath really was compared to what it meant to put down any kind of man or monster—not just once but the many times Tim and Raylan had killed to fulfill writs of execution. Raylan squared his jaw.

“Whatever you’re doing cowboy, keep it up. He’s not been this open since basic training.”

“Is that your blessing?”

“If you thought you needed it.”

Raylan nodded. He decided in the last few minutes he, personally, hadn’t needed it, but it might matter to Tim.

“I’ve seen him getting ready to go to war more than a couple times, and he’s never acted like he wouldn’t be back. For some reason this time, Tim thinks he’s not coming back. You know what that’s about?”

Raylan sighed. “Think so. I thought we came to an understanding.”

“Don’t know what kind of monsters you have in Kentucky, but I do know he’s big on being there to have your six... the thing is you need to remember that goes both ways.”

“Oh, I know.”

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The Sunday before they were supposed to leave for Kentucky Raylan went looking for Tim. He found him in a bedroom in the main ranch house pulling clothes out of a dresser and packing them into a deployment duffle bag.

“Is this your room?”

Tim shrugged.

Raylan walked the room. It looked bare and empty. “If this is your room, why are we staying in the little house?”

“Thought we could use some privacy.”

Raylan nodded. “Well that has been nice.”

A quick, suggestive lift of Tim’s eyebrows indicated he agreed. Raylan half-smiled back.

“Tim, where’s all your stuff?”

Tim held up a T-shirt. “This is my stuff.”
“Where’re your books, your porn stash, that kind of shit?”


“For a rich man, you don’t own much.”

“Have what I need. Just don’t need much,” Tim said. “I’ve been living out of an Army duffle or go-bag since I was seventeen.”

“No hobbies?” Raylan leaned against the dresser blocking the next row of drawers Tim was moving toward.

Tim’s brow furrowed scrunching up his forehead.

“You know… I know you read and run. What else?” Raylan said.

“I collect weapons and kill monsters,” Tim said.

“For a living. What about the rest of the time?”

“Well, I helped with the K-9 training when I was around, vetted the handlers—”

“Same thing as work.”

“Raylan, what are you getting at? It’s not like I see you do anything besides chase monsters and fuck. Who are you throwing stones at here?” Tim countered.

Raylan held out his hands. “Fair enough. I was just curious.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think?”

“Is this about the vampire thing?”

Raylan rolled his eyes. “No, this is about the ‘us’ thing. I love you but I don’t know what you like to do besides kill things and fool around. Color me curious.”

“Oh.”

“That all right with you?”

Raylan watched Tim’s lips twitch and figured it was. He turned around and slid open one of the drawers he’d been leaning against. “So where’s your stash of Ranger panties?” Raylan asked, giving Tim a sly look.

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Raylan, where have you gone off to?

Boyd was reclining in what looked like a church pew, sitting in the row in front of Raylan. Boyd had his elbow on the back of the pew, sitting sideways to talk with Raylan.

Raylan recognized the dream immediately for what it was and felt himself shielding his thoughts—much like he communicated with Nahtoo. He could hear her and talk with her mentally, but he could keep her out of his mind when he wanted to. Of course, that worked both ways. Shielding so hard,
he couldn’t pick up anything from Boyd.

Raylan looked around the plain white room with opaque stained-glass windows. It looked like the barest church he’d ever seen.

Boyd. What do you want?

You’re not in Kentucky, Raylan. I was worried. I can barely feel you, Boyd said, a hint of fang showing as he spoke.

Good. Maybe I don’t want you to feel me.

Well, Raylan, I’d think you’d understand my concern. Your health is my health and vice versa. It goes both ways.

Boyd, I didn’t ask you for this. I am sure as hell not gonna be at your beck and call. I’m a US Deputy Marshal, if you hadn’t forgotten.

That’s not a very charitable attitude Raylan, or grateful.

Never claimed to be either Boyd. Now get out of my head.

Raylan woke easier than the last time he dreamed with Boyd. Then he smiled, because he’d learned that he could shield his mind in his sleep from Boyd and distance weakened their bond.

For the first time in almost a week and a half, the idea of having to head back to Kentucky seemed a lot less daunting.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: mention of past rape and PTSD associated with it.

And, of course, a thank-you out to Jonjo for beta-reading. : )

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Growing up exploring the hollers around Harlan, Raylan was a born and bred expert on what qualified as the middle of nowhere. Two days after they’d left the ranch, Raylan climbed out of Tim’s truck at a farmhouse outside Kelly in the bona fide middle of nowhere.

He opened the back passenger-side door and let Sheeba spill out of the den she’d made of the backseat when an angry voice called out to them raising Raylan’s hackles and puffing up Sheeba’s neck mane. They’d had two ten-hour days in a row on the road. He didn’t know how the dog felt, but he was ready to be out of the truck.

A tall woman with short black hair advanced toward them. Raylan gave Sheeba the command to heel. The irate woman planted her feet and her hands on her hips. “What do you think you’re doing bringing a Trollhound to a gargoyle sanctuary?”

Raylan sniffed the air and picked up a hint of cat. He rested his right hand at his hip, pulling aside his jean jacket to show his badge and sidearm. “Ma’am,” Raylan said. He kept a squinty-eyed gaze locked on her but tipped his head toward Tim’s direction.

Tim made his way around the grill of his massive truck. “Elizabeth?”

“Oh, it’s you.”

“I called ahead and told you we were stopping off for the night,” Tim said.

“When did you do that?” Raylan said quietly to him, still keeping Elizabeth in his sights. Her dominant, aggressive stance hadn’t changed. Tim didn’t answer him.

“You didn’t mention you were bringing a Trollhound.”

“Sheeba, sit-heel.” She immediately made her way over to Tim’s side. “She’s a fully trained K-9. She’s not a threat. Fact is, she’s the exact opposite.”

“Deputy, you’re always welcome. But not the hound. Those beasts are the reason European trolls were hunted into extinction.”

The history of Trollhounds was actually iffier than that. But it was generally accepted they’d been bred to hunt down trolls in Europe. And Elizabeth was right, European trolls were extinct. Raylan thought there might be a malevolence of American trolls living in Tennessee, but it’d been years since he’d read or heard anything about them. Either way, Sheeba was worlds away from the Trollhounds that had been bred to hunt two or three hundred years ago.

Raylan nodded when Tim made just that point.
“That was centuries ago,” Tim scoffed.

“Trolls and gargoyles are closely enough related that I can’t let you take that dog out into the preserve.”

Raylan had to admire how she stood her ground.

“All right. I’ll leave her here with you and Raylan. Would that appease you?”

Raylan shifted his eyes between Tim and Elizabeth as Tim’s concession down-shifted the aggression in their little stand-off.

She nodded.

“Elizabeth, I take it?” Raylan asked. Then he introduced himself and complimented the land and the house, attempting to try charming her. Typically, Tim’s interpersonal communication arsenal was a lot less diverse than his weapon collection, especially with people whom he’d lost patience, and usually included the occasional olive branch followed by stoicism or a smart-assed comment. Since the branch hadn’t broken any ice, Raylan doubted stony stoicism would get them much further and moved to head off the smart-assed comment altogether.

“I told the harpies last time they were up at the house Skyping with Louie that you were planning to be here shortly before sunset,” Elizabeth said, ignoring Raylan’s glad-handing. Maybe Tim had nailed it with stoicism after all. “They should be along.”

“How are they settling?” Raylan asked.

“They work well with the ‘goyles—especially with culling the local wildlife.”

“How do you mean?” Raylan asked. He never had heard many details about Tim and Rachel’s previous visit.

“This is protected land—hunting is banned. We have some neighboring farmers who’ve never been happy about that because the deer herds can be a nuisance when they infringe on their crops. ‘Goyles aren’t necessarily hunters by nature—they’re more inclined to feed on carrion. I kept the peace by bringing in my pard to hunt on the full moons. But now the harpies have stepped in and filled the role of predators. The neighboring farmers seem to be complaining less about the deer. From what the local Fish and Wildlife biologist tells me anyway,” Elizabeth said.

Tim nodded, but Raylan’s brow furrowed. “You didn’t tell Fish and Wildlife about the harpies, did you?”

Raylan’s immediate concern was that word would get around they’d placed the mythological creatures there. They’d been taken and held in captivity for more years than Raylan thought the marshals had uncovered. The marshals knew the harpies had been held in captivity by a Florida cartel vampire master who Raylan executed—but that didn’t account for the duration of that time in captivity. As the harpies were literally immortal beings and their captors had a life span that only ended when someone put a stop to them, “years of captivity” didn’t mean the same thing to them as it did with humans. Raylan feared it could have been closer to decades or more. A Fish and Wildlife biologist might mean well, but Raylan wasn’t crazy about the idea of the harpies’ new living arrangements leaking out.

“Oh no,” Elizabeth said. “He thinks my pard is still culling the herd for the ’goyles.”

“They’ve only been here a month,” Raylan asked. “Can you really tell that much of a difference?”
“Actually yes. With fall bearing down on us, we’re already starting to see the ’goyles putting on a layer of winter weight they’ve failed to in the past. I expect we’ll probably have more of the older adults and juveniles survive the winter.”

“Are you concerned about them depleting the deer population?” Tim asked.

She grimaced. “Not at all. I think if we’d realized how much healthier the gargoyle population would be, then we’d have increased the hunting in the area years earlier.” She looked away and cleared her throat. Raylan picked up a sour hint of guilt that smelled a bit like a mildewed towel. “I hate to think we lost some we didn’t have to.”

Tim pulled Raylan aside, giving Elizabeth the excuse he needed to unpack their overnight bags.

“I’m going to go and hunt with the harpies tonight. I need you to spend the night at the house with Sheeba.”

Raylan leaned against the tailgate of Tim’s truck. “You could have told me we were coming.”

Tim looked at Raylan surprised.

“Never crossed your mind to ask me about stopping off here, did it,” Raylan said. It wasn’t a question.

“I thought you said you wanted to see the place.”

“I did. Weeks ago.”

Tim’s eyebrows furrowed.

“Sometimes, you are so focused in here—” Raylan tapped Tim on the forehead “—you forget to you need to actually use that pretty mouth of yours.”

Tim cocked his head and lifted an eyebrow.

“Oh, you know I think your mouth is pretty. Not the point.”

“You seem to already know what I’m thinking.”

“Not all the time. Case in point,” Raylan said, waving his hand in the air. “I’d like to be consulted now and then.”

“All right,” Tim said. He pulled Raylan’s overnight bag out of the back and handed it to him.

“You’ll work on it?”

Tim dipped his head in a nod. “Wasn’t sure what kind of time we’d have once we got back to Lexington. The first couple weeks we got here were pretty tight. I promised the harpies I’d come back and hunt with them before I left them here… but then things got a little weird….” Tim cleared his throat. “I didn’t want them to think I forgot or, um, something.”

“ Weird?” Raylan asked.

“They’re immortal predators who tossed me around the woods for a good four hours.” Tim dug around in his bag, pulling out a pair of BDUs and his boots, avoiding Raylan’s eyes.

Raylan didn’t smell anything that popped on his radar as deceit, but his gut told him he still wasn’t
getting the whole story. “You’re going to be all right out there alone with them?”

“Oh sure.” Tim toed off his running shoes, unbuckled his belt, then stripped off his jeans.

Raylan was alarmed at first, but looked around and saw that no one was around to see the show but him and Sheeba, who was sitting beside them waiting for something interesting to happen. “What are you going to hunt?”

“Whatever they want,” Tim said. “We ran most of the night last time I was here. They killed a couple deer.” Tim wiggled into his BDUs, shoved his feet into his boots, then hopped up onto the tailgate to lace them up. He peeled off the blue Polo shirt and replaced it with a black, long-sleeved waffle-knit shirt.

“And Sheeba?” Raylan asked, causing the dog to turn her attention to him. She wandered closer to him, bumping into his leg.

“I can’t leave her with someone hostile toward her. That’s why I need you to stay with her.” Tim started digging through another bag, shifting items into a backpack and the mysterious bottomless pockets of his pants.

Raylan nodded. “I see. So you’re just gonna leave me with the dog who snores.”

“Not that loud. You’re going to complain about snoring?”

“No idea what you could possibly mean by that,” Raylan said.

Tim shook his head, then started to spray his clothes from his feet up.

Sheeba sneezed and Raylan all but snorted. “What is that shit?”

“Bug and tick repellent. S’posed to be scent free. I shoulda my clothes sprayed down by last night, but this’ll have to do.”

“It’s not.”

“Not what?”

“Scent free.”

“Huh. You can pick that up?”

Raylan nodded.

“I’ll hang back during the hunting, I guess,” Tim said. “You remember the K-9 commands, right? From the session last weekend? She’ll listen to you.”

“Sure.”

One of the harpies flew out of the woods, with the other two not far behind her, calling out to Tim.

“Looks like my dates are here.” Tim leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to the corner of Raylan’s mouth. He popped his eyebrows once. “Think about me tonight.”

“Dick. Be careful.”

“Walk Sheeba for me. Wish she coulda run with us tonight.”
“We’ll be fine. She was all right after you walked her last night in Tulsa.”

“I took her for a run.” Tim gave Raylan a speculative look.

“Talked about this already. I ain’t really the running type.”

“Wouldn’t hurt you.”

“Might. Running in cowboy boots’ll just lead to blisters. She’ll settle for a walk. Go on. Your dates don’t appear to be all that patient.”

Tim rolled his eyes.

Elizabeth was unwilling to allow Raylan to walk Sheeba without her, so he agreed that, fine, she could come along. She insisted the Trollhound stay on a leash. Raylan agreed to that as well, but was pretty sure if Sheeba wanted to be free of him, she would just pull his arm out of its socket.

“How does a wereleopard end up running a Gargoyle sanctuary?”

“It had less to do with my status as a wereanimal as it did my area of study—preternatural zoology.”

“Huh. What kinds of jobs are out there for preternatural zoologists?”

“Gargoyle sitters.”

Raylan nodded a tight-lipped acceptance. “Fair point. The harpies making much progress learning English?”

“They turn up every couple days and Skype with Louie. That’s helped wean out most of the confusing Latin. Haven’t heard much of it from them since that whole prophecy thing with your partner,” Elizabeth said.

“Prophecy?”

She shot him a confused look. “Yeah, the harpy with the black feathers, Celaeno, graced your buddy with a prophecy before he left. He didn’t tell you this?” she said.

“No,” Raylan said, pausing. “No, no he didn’t.”

“Didn’t mean to step in it. Sorry.”

“What was the prophecy?”

“Ahhh. I don’t know. Something about giving up his life for a necromancer? I think it was more involved than that. Those weren’t the right words,” she said. “I didn’t even know there were necromancers still around. But then who knew harpies still existed?”

“They’re rare.” Raylan closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Well, if you run into any, you might want to look sharp. Keep that peashooter on your hip handy.”

Raylan nodded. “That actually explains a lot.”

“Celaeno was upset for a while about it. The harpies really like your partner.”

“He seems to engender that in all the girl monsters.”
“Monsters. Nice,” Elizabeth said. “Is that how all executioners talk about preternatural creatures?”

“Not ordinarily, no. That was…” Raylan thought about it and was unsure why he slung that term at the harpies.

“Jealousy?” Elizabeth offered.

“Is that what it smells like?” Raylan raised an eyebrow. He knew that she was as capable as he was, if not more, of scenting emotions; she just wouldn’t know he could pick up on them as well.

“A little, but something more complicated than that.” Elizabeth smirked. “Envy?”

“Really. I have a therapist already,” Raylan said. “Don’t need another.”

It proved to be a long night before Tim emerged from the woods with the harpies the next morning.

Raylan was drinking coffee on the porch, his boots up on the railing, before sunrise the following morning. Sheeba was lying under his legs.

When Tim emerged, she rushed out to meet him. Sensing that they were playing and not working, she tumbled Tim onto his back.

Elizabeth frowned through the screen door. “Dog was better behaved for you than him,” she said to Raylan.

“I think she knew she had to be.”

Tim climbed the steps up to the porch. He zeroed in on Raylan.

“Have a good night?” Tim picked Raylan’s boots up off the railing and dropped his legs. He bent down and kissed Raylan, who crinkled his nose.

“You smell like evergreen, blood, and bug spray,” Raylan said.

“Still?” Tim winced, sniffing his shirt sleeve. “I can’t smell it.”

“It’s there. And something wilder.” Raylan’s eyes flashed at Tim.

Tim grinned briefly. “I’m going to shower.”

“One would hope.”

“Then we can go home.”

Raylan raised an eyebrow. “If you let me drive your fancy truck.”

Tim scowled. He hadn’t let Raylan drive on the trip back, telling him the center of gravity on the truck wasn’t like a normal truck. Then he got cagey when Raylan tried to find out what exactly wasn’t normal about the vehicle.

“If I’m not driving, you’re sleeping for at least four hours before we head out.”

Tim’s forehead was still lined in consternation but he didn’t disagree.

“Our stuff is in the bedroom across from the upstairs bathroom,” Raylan said. “It’ll be the one with all the dog hair on the bed.”
“She’s not that bad,” Tim said, heading inside.

“She’s a shedding machine.”

***

While Tim was in the shower, Raylan felt out the harpies.

They’d picked up a fair amount of English in the month or so since he’d last seen them.

Elizabeth finally agreed to let Sheeba have the run of the grassed area between the house and the woods. While Sheeba and two of the harpies played chase around the house, Raylan pulled Celaeno aside. She perched on the railing of the porch, her talons wrapped around the rail while she squatted at rest. He figured this was as close to a relaxed position as she got. It certainly explained why all the harpies had such great muscle tone in their legs.

“I heard you saw a prophecy for Tim,” he said, leaning against railing looking up at her.

She offered him a shamefaced nod, repeating the word, “Prophecy.”

“It’s okay…. I mean, it’s not like you can help it, can you?”

She pulled her wings in more tightly around her, ruffling them into place, but didn’t reply. Raylan wasn’t sure she understood him.

“Do your prophecies always come true?”

She tilted her head to the side. “No comprendo.”

“Your prophecies… you know that word, right?”

She nodded. “Sí,” she said, then corrected herself, “yes.”

“Hmmm, how about veritas? Isn’t that truth in Latin?” Raylan asked, thinking of the word for truth he’d seen on the side of a mug belonging to one of the asshole AUSAs in Miami who’d gone to Harvard.

She nodded and her face crumpled, concerning Raylan.

“Your prophecies are veritas? They come true?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“What was the prophecy you gave Tim?”

She looked confused.

“Teem’s prophecy?” Raylan said, pronouncing his partner’s name like the harpies and Nahtoo liked to say it.

“Ut salvificem Necromancer… vos subditi… vita tua.”

“All right now, that’s a mouthful. Any idea what it means in English?”

She looked at him blankly.

Raylan sighed, then he heard Tim behind him.
“The English translation is kinda loose,” Tim said, “goes something like ‘to save the Necromancer, you submit your life.’”

Raylan turned to Tim, feeling a spike of anger. He grabbed Tim’s upper arm and pulled him away from the house in the direction of the truck.

“Excuse us, Celaeno. Need a word with Tim,” Raylan said, not knowing if she understood or not. Apparently, she did, because she took off to join her sisters in teasing Sheeba. He lowered his voice, knowing that Elizabeth and the harpies had sharp hearing. “That seems like vital information, don’t you think?”


“But you’ve had a month to think about it. A month of weighing that against all your actions,” Raylan said. “And you have some ideas about what it could mean.”

“I do.”

Raylan shook his head. “Do you remember what Louie said about the prophecies… they’re more hindrance than help. They make people second-guess all their decisions.” Raylan took a long breath in through his nose, tipping his head up as if searching for patience, then he released it slowly. “Believe the word he used for it was torture.”

“Oh, I know.”

“And you thought you’d just float the idea of becoming a vampire by me without telling me this was why you were thinking it?” Raylan tried to keep the volume of his voice from raising in frustration.

“That’s not the only reason,” Tim whispered. “We’re going to separate you from Boyd Crowder and if we don’t find some way to stop another vampire from tying you down, you’ll be right back where you are now. Maybe tied to someone worse.”

“So, because of some prophecy, you’re considering turning. Dying. Becoming immortal? To sacrifice yourself for me,” Raylan said. “Oh shit. This is why Peter thinks you believe you aren’t coming back to New Mexico.”

“When did you and Peter….”

“Not the point,” Raylan said, holding up a finger.

“This isn’t the place to talk about this,” Tim sighed.

“No kidding.”

“Let’s get on the road or we’ll never get home. We’re due back in the office tomorrow.”

***

Raylan didn’t see what the big deal was about Tim’s truck. But the younger marshal tossed him the keys with a warning. “Just don’t push any of the console buttons. It’s got some aftermarket… um, additions, that it’d be a bad idea to initiate on the highway.”

He rolled his eyes. “Even your truck is a geardo.”

Tim grinned for a brief moment. Once they loaded up and pulled out, both Tim and his dog slept
most of the way to their little house near Ford, about a thirty-minute commute from the courthouse in Lexington.

Three hours after leaving Kelly, Raylan pulled Tim’s truck into the carport under the porch of the house Tim had moved them into. He shifted to park, turning the ignition off.

Sheeba whined in the backseat, telling him she was officially tired of the truck and wanted out. He didn’t really blame her but wasn’t sure about setting her loose to roam the woods around their house. Raylan started to ask Tim about it but was surprised to find that the truck’s lack of forward motion and her vocalizations hadn’t roused him.

Raylan watched Tim a moment trying to think of the last time he’d caught him asleep, or if he ever really had. Tim was always up before Raylan. Sometimes, Tim fell asleep before Raylan at night but the lights were always off. In New Mexico, they’d snoozed after sex a couple times, but they’d been folded together, one waking the other as soon as the other stirred.

Raylan turned in his seat reaching back to run a hand over Sheeba’s head and bury his fingers in the deep fur of the mane on the side of her neck quieting her so he had a moment or two to himself to watch Tim sleep. He admired how long Tim’s lashes seemed fanned against his cheeks. With his face relaxed, Raylan marveled at how his partner seemed every single one of the ten years that he was Raylan’s junior.

Raylan took a moment to dwell on how he got there with Tim: in Kentucky and not even that annoyed with the idea, in a relationship that was showing cracks he hadn’t expected and wasn’t sure how to deal with, in a serious relationship with a man. He used to think that maybe he’d marry again one day and that vague idea went with an image of someone like Winona—someone female. Raylan’d always been attracted to men as well as women, but hadn’t seriously considered cohabitation, temporary or something more permanent with another man. Until now. Now, the specific idea of something more permanent with Tim fit him just fine—cracks in the relationship notwithstanding. His eyes traveled over to the house he was sharing with the other man—something he’d not seen coming.

“Shit.” The house.

Tim sucked in a breath. “Wha…?” he said, waking up tense to scan their surroundings before relaxing. “We’re home.”

“Home, yeah,” Raylan sighed. “You bought this house, didn’t you?”

Tim’s eyes were wide and confused, halfway between awake and asleep. “Yeah…”

Raylan squared his jaw and shook his head.

“Izzat a problem?”

“How long you planning to stay in Kentucky?” Raylan asked.

“As long as you’re here.”

“So you bought us a house without running it by me?”

Tim squinted his eyes and then opened them wide, blinking, then wiping sleep from the corners. “Again, why is that a problem?”

“How much did you spend?”
“Aw Raylan….”

“I can look it up on the property appraiser’s web site.”

Tim nearly swallowed a short laugh successfully. “You sure about that?”

Raylan glowered, knowing Tim had a point. Raylan’d fallen into the habit of letting Tim do research. The younger marshal was just so much faster at it. And a little bit ingenious.

“I was a marshal for well past twenty years before I partnered with you.”

“You’ll just get Rachel look it up.”

“Or that girl that works the desk. The one with the cat-free apartment,” Raylan said.

“She only told you that because she wanted to sleep with you.”

“That was weeks ago.” Raylan brushed off the comment, but was oddly pleased by Tim’s comment. Jealousy on his partner smelled like his first swig of whiskey snuck from one of Arlo’s bottles—it seared his throat but spread a comforting warmth through him. “Believe she’s now more scared of you than left wanting to sleep with me.”

“Which means she won’t look it up for you.”

Raylan didn’t disagree so he said nothing. “Can we let Sheeba out? Will she run off?”

“Seriously? Did any of the K-9 training we worked on sink in?”

“She’s your dog, Tim.”

“She’s backing both of us up.”

She whined, as if she knew they were dithering over her freedom. Raylan knew he needed to take a piss. He was sure she did, too.

So, he opened the door and climbed out. “I’m letting her out.”

Tim rolled his eyes in Raylan’s direction and he could have sworn he’d heard him mutter the word, “Duh.”

Raylan opened Sheeba’s door of the crew cab, and she bounded out. He proceeded to unhook the quilted protector from the driver’s side. “Did you want to get the other side?” he asked Tim. “I’ll take this straight in to the washer.”

Tim got out of his side of the truck, opened the door on the passenger side, and stared at the cover. “It’s not that bad.”

“It’s not that great either. If we have to go down to Harlan, you’ll insist we drive this tank of yours and take the dog smell with us,” Raylan said.

“And the dog. It’s really not that bad.”

“Not gonna argue with you.” Raylan flipped the cover over and climbed up into the backseat to stretch across and release the seat protector from the headrests on the back and front seats. “Go in and finish your nap. I’ll bring in the bags, then lock up the back and you can do what you want with your weapons later.”
Tim’s expression seemed pensive. “I thought you wanted to talk.”

Raylan backed out of the truck, pulling the dog’s quilt with him. “Not if all you’re lookin’ for is a fight,” he said, slamming the back door of the truck.

Raylan gave the quilt a good shake, then let himself in the door to the bottom floor of the house. The downstairs entry opened into a room that served as a combination mudroom and laundry room. He shoved the quilt down into the washer, dropped a Tide pod in after it, and started the washer on a long, hot cycle.

He found Tim at back of his truck with the truck bed cover popped open and the tailgate down.

“Hand me those.” Raylan pulled their bags and their executioner’s kits out of the back. Two trips into the laundry room deposited their luggage inside the house. “I’m serious about the nap.”

“I’m all right. Just wasn’t awake before,” Tim said.

“You need any help with your guns and…?” Raylan waved his hand in the direction of Tim’s weaponry, not knowing what all his partner had stashed in gun vault drawers that took up the bottom half of the truck bed.

“I got it.”

“All right then. I’m gonna feed Sheeba,” Raylan said, then whistled and shouted her name.

“Did you eat?” Tim asked.

Raylan shook his head.

“You didn’t have breakfast either,” Tim said, pausing his shuffling around of weapons and ammo into a bag that Raylan assumed was going into the house.

“Guess I didn’t.”

“Are you sick or are you just that mad at me?”

Raylan stood dumbfounded. “Not mad you. Not one hundred percent happy with you but I ain’t mad. Just not hungry.”

Tim squinted at him and turned to face him full-on. “You’re not hungry.” Tim’s tone seemed to indicate this was astounding somehow.

Raylan shrugged. “Nope.”

“Raylan, ever since we hit New Mexico, you been eating like both your legs are hollow. You sure you feel all right?”

“Yep. Don’t know that I can even get sick with Boyd’s marks on me.”

Tim held the back of his fingers to Raylan’s forehead for a moment before Raylan batted his hand away.

“Huh. No fever. You feel cool actually.”

Sheeba came running up. “You got that cooler with her food?”
Tim handed it over, and Raylan walked off with his dog, leaving him behind, looking concerned.

Raylan must have fed Sheeba and started a pot of coffee from the sounds and smell creeping down the stairs.

Tim climbed the stairs of their upside-down house into the kitchen and dining room area to find his dog licking one of their cereal bowls and his boyfriend cradling a coffee mug. Tim had known Raylan was cold. Tim’s eyes automatically scanned the room for threats. The top floor was open with a kitchen in one corner, a dining area on that and the other half of the main room a living area. In his sock feet, he padded over past the bathroom to peek into the small bedroom he called an office—the only one on that level. He craned his neck to the door of the glassed-in sunroom, satisfied the top-floor of the house was secure. Until he got one of his old Ranger buddies out to ward the place, Tim wouldn’t be able to ratchet down his level of vigilance.

He’d checked the ground floor already, where the second and third bedrooms were located. What made the house attractive wasn’t the layout, but the land surrounding it. The house was set back far enough away from other people, he felt like it was defendable. He could train Sheeba to run a perimeter, but that would take a few days if not a week. What Tim did like about the house was that they weren’t boxed in on either level.

Raylan nodded to him.

Yep, Tim thought, he’s still mad. Could be about the house. Or his vampire scheme. Or the prophecy. It was probably all three.

Tim pulled down a mug and poured some coffee.

“How’d you do with the food?” Tim asked. Because of her size and energy level, Sheeba was fed a raw diet, which meant heavy protein content including organ meat. Raylan had been trying to desensitize himself to the smell of liver after it triggered his near panic attack a couple weeks ago.

“Better. Don’t think I’ll ever like the smell, but it doesn’t send me around the bend now.”

Tim nodded. “I called the UK meat lab and their butcher shop is going to get a special order together for Friday for her diet.”

“Wouldn’t hurt to pick up a steak or two when you’re there,” Raylan said. “I think we have more Sheeba food, than people food in the house.”

“I’ll see what they’ve got. Come on,” he said, tangling his fingers with Raylan’s. He tugged Raylan in the direction of the door out to the sunroom. The sunroom had doors that opened out onto a deck that wrapped around three sides of the house with stairs to the ground on either side. Together the sunroom and deck extended out over the area that made up the carport.

Raylan followed him to a sectional wicker set that took up one end of the room, facing out into a view of the woods. The leaves were finally bleeding out the summer into fall golds, reds, and some straight to brown. Tim dropped his mug onto a coffee table and then sank down into the dark blue cushions on one end of the couch stretching his legs out over the sectional foot rest bumped up to the couch.

“Sit. You want to talk. Let’s talk,” he said.

Raylan took a seat on the cushion next to him, closer than he’d expected. He slid his arm along the back of the couch, his fingers brushing Tim’s hair. Raylan handed him his coffee and Tim sat up, wiggling back into a more upright position before he took it.
“Thanks,” Tim said.

Raylan gave him a quiet smile in return.

“It was one-thirty.”

Raylan’s eyes narrowed. “Pardon?”

“The house. A hundred-thirty. But most of that was the land. Property’s a decent investment,” Tim said, defending his decision.

“In a podunk little Kentucky town?”

“Well, it’s close to the river, a short commute into Lexington,” Tim said. “And we’re on the Harlan side of the courthouse if we have to head south one morning.”

“Would have liked to’ve been asked.”

Tim knew he’d pushed Raylan too far. He just wasn’t used to asking someone else’s opinion, but he wasn’t ready to admit that yet so he went with a logical argument. “No hotel would take Sheeba.”

“Fair point. You’re gonna let me foot half the bill on this.”

“You got sixty-five grand lying around?”

“Could have.”

“Planning to rob a bank with Boyd Crowder?” Tim said.

“Funny.” Raylan pointed at him. “I have specialized… skills, ya know.”

“Like?”

“I’ll call Candice and raise some zombies. Been feeling a little itchy since we got back anyway. I haven’t raised a zombie in over a month. That’s never a good thing.”

“Raylan, you don’t have to feel like you have to…. I’ve got money. More than I know what to do with.”

Raylan held up his hand. “That’s been made more than clear enough. If we’re gonna be partners, things need to be equal.”

“My money makes you uncomfortable.”

Tim watched Raylan press his lips together. “Wouldn’t use that word. But I admit I don’t find myself exactly easy with the idea either.”

Tim nodded and tucked his knee up so it bumped against Raylan’s thigh. “Just don’t let it scare you off.”

“All right. But only if you promise to talk to me before you do anything else like this.” Raylan waved his hand around. “This is a huge decision. Couples end marriages over shit like buying and selling a house.” Raylan gave Tim a pointed look.

“What? You wanted a place in the suburbs?”
Raylan snorted. “No, but a pool woulda been nice. I got a pool in Miami.”

“Seriously? You were complaining about the expense three minutes ago.”

“No, I was complaining about you buying us a house like it was a new box of condoms.”

“Speaking of…. we need to make a grocery list,” Tim said, shifting a little closer to Raylan.

“Too cold in Kentucky for a pool anyway,” Raylan murmured, then sipped his coffee.

“How ’bout a hot tub?”

“Oh sure,” Raylan started. Then he saw Tim’s face. “You’re serious.”

“And you’re unnaturally cold.” Tim reached over to grab Raylan’s hand.

“My blood just got thin from living in Miami for six years.”

“Is that a real thing?” Tim said.

“Feels real enough whenever I’ve been sent north with an execution warrant during the winter months.”

Tim took a deep breath. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Celaeno’s prophecy.”

“That’s why you think you aren’t going back to New Mexico, isn’t it?”

Tim nodded.

Raylan pointed his finger and tapped it against Tim’s head. “You can’t keep all the important shit that I really need to know buttoned up in here. Tight-lipped asshole.”

Tim ducked his head. “I know. After I found you with Bo… I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“You could still go back to New Mexico if you turned. Not that I want you to. Turn that is,” Raylan said. “I still think there’s got to be another way around Boyd.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“I feel it? I like you warm.” Raylan’s hand cupped the back of Tim’s head, pulling him toward him for a kiss. Tim rolled with it, leaning into Raylan to slide his tongue into his mouth tasting coffee and a hint of vanilla ice cream. Raylan had a habit of eating it by the spoonful on the sly now and then when he didn’t think Tim noticed. Maybe a part of Raylan still was a poor boy from Harlan sneaking a spoonful of vanilla ice cream when he thought no one was looking. Tim pulled away from the kiss for a moment to put his mug down on the coffee table. He took Raylan’s and did the same.

Tim kissed Raylan again with a vague idea of what he’d like to do to his lover, but suddenly he felt unsure. In the last few weeks Tim would lead into their lovemaking with something specific in mind, and then Raylan would steer him far astray of his intended plan. Raylan had yet to try going down on Tim, and Tim wasn’t pushing. He’d recently learned to welcome the unexpected.

“Are we really out of condoms?” Raylan broke the kiss.

Tim grinned and dug one out of his pocket with a packet of lube.

“Last one. What’s your plan here cowboy?”
“Take your pants off?”

“All right.” Tim stood up, tossed the condom and the lube onto the cushion next to Raylan, letting him decide who’d be wearing it. The first time Tim initiated sex after Bo had kidnapped Raylan, he’d planned to go slow and lean heavy on tenderness. But Raylan needed and wanted the opposite that night, meeting his opening overture with aggressive passion, topping Tim for the first time, and fucking him into the mattress.

Tim shucked his jeans and boxers. He pulled his socks off. He’d left his boots in the mudroom; he wasn’t a barbarian after all. Shoes and cream-colored carpet just didn’t mix. Raylan balked at his “no-shoes in the house” rule, and Tim figured the point was moot now they had a dog traipsing in and out. But it went against his sense of discipline to go back on a rule once set.

Raylan pulled the tongue of his belt through the buckle and flipped open the button on his jeans. The sound of the zipper teeth separating made Tim dig his toes into the carpet.

“Shirt too. I want to look at your tatt while you ride me.” Tim guessed that answered the question of who would be wearing the condom.

Tim pulled his shirt over his head letting it fall on the couch and reached down to pick up the lube packet. “You mind?” Tim asked, waving the packet. Sometimes prep was utilitarian, and other times it was part of their foreplay.

Raylan shook his head, lifted his ass, and pushed his jeans and boxers down past his knees kicking them off. “S’fine. Go ahead.”

Tim tore open the packet, spread it across his fingers, and propped a foot on the couch, then stretched his arm behind him. The crinkle of Raylan tearing open the foil packet drew Tim’s eyes to where Raylan was sliding the condom down his cock, but his eyes were on Tim.

“C’mere, you.” Raylan held a hand out to take Tim’s non-lubed hand. Tim climbed astride Raylan’s lap, a knee to each side. He wrapped his hand around Raylan’s cock, transferring the rest of the lube along the latex shielding Raylan’s cock.

He felt Raylan’s cool hands on his waist slide down to his hips and around behind him. Tim gripped one of Raylan’s broad shoulders to steady himself and let his knees slide further apart. Raylan’s fingers dug into his ass cheeks, spreading him open. Tim took Raylan’s cock in hand and guided it into position.

“Ready?” Tim asked, looking down into Raylan’s eyes and taking a deep breath. The other marshal’s pupils were dilated and Tim wondered if his matched.

“Here goes,” Tim said and released a long breath sinking down onto Raylan’s cock in stages, until Raylan was almost fully inside him.

“Oh shit,” Raylan cursed, saying the words against Tim’s lips. “I love your ass.”

Tim half-laughed. “Romantic.”

Raylan hiccupped a laugh back himself. “You know I love the rest of you, too.”

“I do.” Tim slid home and grunted, his eyes half-closed. He didn’t always know what to do with love declarations. They weren’t something he’d grown up with. Tim whispered against Raylan’s lips, “I do, too.” He felt Raylan exhale into his mouth, like they were sharing the air between them.
Raylan’s hands clamped on his waist tightly, tugging him down. He hitched his hips a little grinding into Tim.

“You feel so good,” Raylan murmured.

“So do you.” Tim wrapped his arms around Raylan’s neck and Raylan closed the inch between their mouths with a deep kiss. Tim started to rock his hips, but Raylan wrapped his arms around him, holding him firm in place.

“C’mon, Ray,” Tim said, breaking the kiss. “I need to move.”

“In a sec.”

Tim groaned, he could practically feel Raylan’s cock pulsing inside him. He bore down around Raylan, squeezing his cock.

“Oh lord,” Raylan moaned. “Need you to promise me.”

“Promise what?” Tim breathed, letting his head fall back.

“Look at me,” Raylan said, his voice serious. Tim met his eyes.

“Promise me you won’t try and turn without you and I coming to some kind of an agreement first.”

“You asshole. This is so not playing fair.”

“You make me pin you down Tim, I’m gonna pin you down. Now promise me.”

Tim bore down on Raylan’s cock again, and to Tim’s satisfaction, Raylan inhaled sharply, curling his hips up a bit in reaction.

“Do you wanna fuck or fight, Ray?” Tim said.

“Please just promise me,” Raylan whispered into Tim’s mouth.

“All right, fine,” Tim said. “I promise I won’t turn unless we have an agreement.”

“Thank you,” Raylan said, kissing Tim. “Was that so hard?”

“Actually, yeah, it was.” Tim begrudged Raylan’s methods.

Raylan shifted his hands to rest loosely on the globes of Tim’s ass.

Tim gripped Raylan’s shoulders for leverage, tucked his knees in closer to Raylan and shifted his hips to rise up and sink down again on Raylan’s cock. Again and again. Faster, then slower. Sliding, then nearly bouncing.

Tim felt Raylan wrap the fingers of his right hand around his cock, stroking him in time with the rhythm of his hips rocking back and down on Raylan’s cock. Tim was vaguely aware of Raylan’s palm on his chest, his fingers finding and pinching his nipple, then tracing something on his Ranger tattoo. He thought it was the stake in the center piercing the skull, but he didn’t care enough to look.

“Hey hey hey,” Raylan said, sitting forward a bit, breaking into Tim’s attention. He ran his finger across a little drop of sweat that had worked its way down to Tim’s nose and kissed him. “Let me shift down a little bit.”
Raylan gripped Tim’s hips to still him and shifted his body down the couch cushion. He pushed the coffee table out of the way with his foot. Tim tried not to think of coffee spilling over onto the carpet.

“Try this angle,” Raylan said.

Tim started to fuck Raylan again, but this time Raylan had the leverage and angle to meet his thrusts, snapping his hips up to fuck him back. Raylan licked his palm and fingers and wrapped his spit-covered fingers around Tim’s cock—just how he liked it. He couldn’t keep himself from arching his back as Raylan sped up his thrusts. Tim reached down to cover Raylan’s hand with his own, guiding the speed of his strokes.

“Tell me when you’re close,” Tim panted out.

“Oh, I’m close,” Raylan said. “Go, I’ll follow.”

Tim cried out when he came, painting the front of Raylan’s faded Gator T-shirt with ropes of white cum. He felt his orgasm in his ass as his muscles bit down on Raylan’s cock, pushing his lover to follow him over the edge, his cock jerking inside him while Tim spasmed around him.

Tim fell forward, out of breath, Raylan still inside him.

Raylan buried his fingers in Tim’s hair and his face in his neck. Tim thought maybe Raylan was sniffing his hair, but he wasn’t sure.

“You don’t play fair cowboy.”

“Never claimed I did.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you all for reading, commenting, and any and all kudos. And especially, thanks for sticking with this fic. :) Sorry chapter two was a little slower to surface than I’d hoped. But have faith, I’ve got more coming.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Thank you to Jonjo for beta-reading and for her patience. This is one of those chapters that I kept putzing around with.

I think we're trigger warning free on this one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Raylan lay awake staring at the ceiling. He’d rolled onto his back and cradled the back of his head in his palms, sandwiched between Tim pressed on one side of him and Sheeba on the other. Both had their backs to him: Tim’s head beneath one elbow and Sheeba’s tail an inch away from his other.

One snored and the other slept peacefully. And the first wasn’t his lover.

He didn’t understand where the insomnia had come from. He’d slept fine in New Mexico. He was mildly irritated because they all had to go back to work the next day. Even the dog.

Raylan wasn’t anywhere near sleep. He buzzed with a cold current of energy running through his veins. But he didn’t have the chills, so he didn’t think he was sick.

It’d been dark enough and he’d been awake long enough that his eyes had adjusted. And the night was quiet and cool enough he had welcomed the warmth emanating from the bodies on either side of him. Or he had two hours ago.

Now, he felt stifled and an incessant need to shake his legs. Great, did that mean he was old enough for restless leg syndrome? The gray working its way into his temples and goatee was the only sign he wanted showing his age.

He closed his eyes and meditated on the breaths around him, counting them alternately: Tim in. Sheeba out. Sheeba in. Tim out.

So he was the first one to hear what started as scratching outside.

The master bedroom was at the farthest end of the house from the carport and was built into the hill so the bedroom windows that were chest high from inside were barely above ground from the outside.

Whatever was scratching was getting impatient and bumped the glass.

With that first bump, Sheeba awoke, her head zeroing in on the sound.

Their visitor bumped the window once more, this time with meaning, and Sheeba was out of the bed guarding them and growling in the direction of the window.

At that point, Tim roused and automatically reached for his gun from a holster he’d mounted to the headboard. He’d made one for Raylan too, but he wasn’t used to automatically hitting the headboard.
for his gun. He kept his on the bedside table, which he would have to change. With Sheeba living with them now, his side of the bed was fast becoming the middle.

“What is it?” Tim asked, sitting up in bed with his gun in his hand.

“Animal, I think.” Raylan was guessing. He reached out with his senses to see what he could feel and he knew immediately what was outside wanting in.

Apparently the raccoon felt the touch of Raylan’s necromancy, because it threw itself through their window. Already dead, a little glass wasn’t going to cause it pain, and therefore didn’t stop it. Everything happened at once: Sheeba growled, poised to attack. The raccoon hissed, and threw itself in Raylan’s direction.

He anticipated Tim’s reaction.

“Don’t—” Raylan yelled to no avail when the boom of a gunshot punctuated the quiet night as Tim aimed true, hitting the raccoon in midair.

“—shoot,” Raylan finished, his ears ringing. “It’s already dead.”

Tim flipped the lights and Raylan winced, shutting his eyes against the glare for a second.

“Goddamn, that stinks,” Tim cursed. “What is it?”

“If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say raccoon. Roadkill maybe?” Raylan said, eyeing the still animal. “But it looks in pretty good shape, except for the giant hole you put in its chest.”

The raccoon that had been stunned by the shot rallied and took another leap in Raylan’s direction. And Sheeba’s training to protect kicked in. She attacked the imminent threat to one of her handlers, grabbing it out of the air, then instinctively shaking the animal to kill it but effectively only flinging dead raccoon matter around the bedroom.

“Sheeba stop,” Raylan ordered.

The raccoon’s chittering reached to the point of a screech. Locked in the Trollhound’s jaws, it tried scratching at Sheeba.

“You sure about that?” Tim asked.

“She’s getting it everywhere. Will she try to eat it?

“No.”

“Good. God knows how long it’s been dead.”

“Can’t you tell?” Tim said, turning. “Sheeba come.” She left on Tim’s heels taking the zombie raccoon with her.

Raylan shrugged. “I probably could but what’s the point?” Raylan mumbled to an empty room, grabbed his Glock from the nightstand, and trailed after them.

Tim led Sheeba out of the house, grabbing his executioner’s kit from the laundry room. Raylan grabbed his animator’s kit and followed.

“I can try putting it to rest, but I think its grave might be the highway north of the property,” Raylan
said. He was guessing, but this wasn’t the first time roadkill had come for him in the night. Granted, it’d been years since it’d happened. When he first moved to Miami, his last chief, Dan didn’t approve of Raylan’s moonlighting as an animator. His opinion changed once Raylan’s power had built up over several months of not raising any zombies resulting in an unfortunate roadkill incident during a fugitive stakeout when he was manning a surveillance van.

“You really want to try to feed that thing your blood?” Tim asked drawing Raylan’s attention to the present.

“Not particularly. Wouldn’t do any good anyway. That only works to put the souls back into human zombies—or whatever it is that makes them who they were.”

“If she drops it, is it going for you again?” Tim asked.

“Most likely. But we need to get it away from her before it does some serious damage.” Raylan didn’t like the way the roadkill was squirming and trying to dig at her. In life, raccoons had agile little handlike paws with sharp nails that tended to be just this side of disgusting on a good day. Even the raccoons seemed to know their hands were rancid. He recalled one that used to wash its hands in a birdbath before it stole away the seed his mama left out for the birds.

“She’s tougher than she looks,” Tim said.

Raylan dug around in his bag and pulled out his machete. “I could behead it.”

“Nah, don’t want to get that close to it.” They were standing in the yard in their boxers and nothing else.

“Sheeba, release. Come.”

She stilled and dropped the chittering raccoon and returned to Tim. As soon as she was clear, he started and kept shooting until he blew off the head and a limb or two. The raccoon was no longer throwing itself at Raylan, but the parts were still moving, inching, and flopping their way in his direction.

“Why does it want you? Did someone send this?”

“Haven’t raised a zombie in weeks. Sometimes the power spills over.”

“Got any ideas?”

“Burn it. It’s the only thing’ll stop it short of putting it to rest,” Raylan said.

“You got your gun?”

Raylan held his Glock up.

“Going to grab the matches and lighter fluid. Shoot any part that moves too much, I guess.”

“Lighter fluid should do it.”

“Sheeba, go to Raylan,” Tim said, walking back to the house.

Raylan kept his eyes on the raccoon, but reached down and ruffled her neck fur. “Good girl.” He wanted to check her out but knew the kind of shit he’d get from Tim if he let roadkill get the jump on him twice in one night.
By three in the morning, Raylan’d started cleaning the bedroom after they’d boarded up the broken window. He’d sent Tim and Sheeba to take a shower to keep her from tracking any more decaying raccoon around the house.

Tim was exhausted but had to admit the clean-up had to be done. The bedroom had stunk like decomp while the yard smelled like burnt hair. So far, after he’d bathed Sheeba, he’d only found superficial cuts around her face. She’d heal those quickly—a day at worst. But zombie raccoon bites and scratches had to be carrying something nasty. His primary concern was infection; she’s whined when he cleaned the cuts with antiseptic and then treated them with antimicrobial ointment in the places he didn’t think she’d lick. He resisted shaving her fur around the wounds. They’d heal better uncovered and her fur was her coat of armor. He wanted her to have it for the next fight.

He’d confined her in the tub while he blew dry her fur with a hair dryer on a barely warm setting.

From the amount of black hair shed in the tub, he was going to have to clean the bathroom when he let her out. Raylan already thought Sheeba’s coat replicated itself. He didn’t need to encourage that line of thought.

When she was reasonably dry, Tim opened the bathroom door wide enough for her to escape, wiggling like any dog happy to be free of her cloying master, then shut Raylan out.

“You done in there?” Raylan said through the door.

Tim eyed the shape of the tub. “Not yet.”

“I’m going to shower upstairs then,” Raylan said.

Tim went to work on the bathroom, cleaning it, then hitting the shower himself. They might get another couple hours of sleep if they were lucky.

Of course, they weren’t.

Tim climbed the stairs to find Raylan drinking coffee at the table near the kitchen, watching his dog lying listless on the floor. He knew she didn’t like baths but pouting wasn’t usually her style.

“I tried to feed her, but she’s not interested,” Raylan said. “And she’s been winking at me.”

“What?”

“Check it out. She smells hurt.”

“How’s that? I put antimicrobial stuff on her. Maybe that’s what you’re smelling.”

“No. It’s less tangible than that. Smells metallic and sad. A bit like rusty rainwater,” Raylan said.

Tim wasn’t sure what that meant exactly but trusted Raylan knew what he was talking about. He knelt down and sure enough, Sheeba would shut her right eyelid and open it. Over and over. Winking at him.

“Shit. We need to find a vet,” Tim said. “One who’ll take Trollhounds. I really thought I’d have a few days to figure that one out.”

Tim went into the office to look up a local vet hospital open twenty-four hours on his laptop and call to see if they’d treat a Trollhound mixed breed K-9. He had some latitude in that she was an official
police dog—vet hospitals tended to be more flexible when it came to fitting in K-9s. For all intents and purposes, in the eyes of the law she was a marshal as much as he and Raylan were.

He was on the phone when Raylan appeared in the doorway with a travel mug.

“Gonna go get dressed,” Raylan said quietly, leaving the coffee behind.

By the time Tim was downstairs dressing for work, Raylan had the seat protector fastened to the backseat.

“Do I need to bring her food or are we coming back before the office?”

Tim raised his eyebrows. “Don’t know. If she’s got a medical issue requiring treatment, she has to sit out off duty until she heals.”

***

Raylan and Tim didn’t walk into the office until almost ten and neither of them had gotten another wink of sleep. Sheeba was sporting a scratch on her cornea that would heal in a day or two, but required eye drops and antibiotics given the scratch was from an animated decomposing animal.

“Where’s this wonder dog partner you insisted I allow you to take on?” Art said when they walked in. “And you’re both late.”

Tim waved a box of a dozen Krispy Kreme doughnuts Raylan convinced him to pick up from the drive-thru at Art as he headed into the breakroom, depositing the box onto the counter near the coffee maker.

Art eyed the box. “That’s a start. Don’t suppose there are any crullers in there.”

Raylan handed Art a waxed paper bag. “Two crullers with maple icing. We won’t tell Leslie.”

Art grinned. “But where’s the dog? The grandkids want pictures.”

“Kind of a long story,” Tim said, explaining their overnight visitor.

“Shit, you weren’t kidding about roadkill following you around,” Art said.

Raylan nodded. “I need to raise some zombies.”

Rachel strolled back through from the breakroom, waving a doughnut pinched between her finger and thumb at them. “You two suck.”

Tim’s brow furrowed at her response.

“Your lack of self-control is no reflection on our largess,” Raylan said, pausing. “We missed you, too.”

“So your dog is home sick?” Art asked.

“For a couple days. She can’t ride in service until the vet clears her,” Tim said.

Art laughed drawing some odd looks at his lack of sympathy. He waved them away. “So what you’re saying is that now you have two benched partners on desk duty.”

Tim started to argue, but then shut his mouth. “’S’pose so,” he said.
Raylan scowled and turned the computer on at his assigned desk. “Where are we with the seizure on Bo Crowder’s assets?”

“You,” Art pointed at Raylan, “need to worry more about getting off desk duty and less about the Crowders.”

“Working on it. Bo’s assets?” Raylan said.

“About that. Rachel?” Art said.

“We are currently working with the US Attorney’s office on the pre-seizure of a number of his properties,” Rachel said.

“Why are we still in pre-seizure?” Tim asked.

“Maybe because you two swanned out of here on holiday after fulfilling the execution warrant?” Rachel said sweetly.

Tim wasn’t a bit sorry about it and shrugged at her.

“Well, the Harlan City Council was less than happy with us and threw a bit of a hoo-ha when we shut down the vampire tourist draws,” Art said. “Seems the good people of Harlan like their vampire businesses. I believe the words they used was ‘hardship.’ Shutting down the vampire mine and zipline gig this close to Halloween would create a ‘hardship’ for local businesses who cater to the tourists.”

“Well, wouldn’t that be a shame,” Raylan said.

Art sent him a sharp look. “Actually, we reopened them and are overseeing the operations. They pull in good money. Taking Bo out has been a windfall for this district’s budget.”

“To a point,” Rachel corrected. “We were finally able to freeze Bo’s bank accounts, but not until a sizeable amount of money was pulled out.”

“Boyd?” Raylan asked.

“We think so,” Rachel said. “We can’t prove it though.”

“How much?”

“A half mil, easy,” Rachel said.

“Jesus Christ,” Tim swore.

“And therein lies the rub,” Art interrupted, pointing at Tim. “We expect a lawsuit from the junior Mr. Crowder any day now. Boyd’s attorney—

“And sire,” Tim said.

“Can’t do anything about that. His vampire attorney has already been in touch with the US Attorney’s office wanting to sue for Bo’s businesses.”

“He won’t get them. No one ever does in criminal forfeitures. Even family.” Tim said.

“Thing is Boyd’s got a different spin. One, he’s a vampire—and that’s an untried area of forfeiture law. Two, it seems he’s started his own church down in Harlan—a vampire church. Can you
imagine such a thing?"

“All pews and blank white walls, and plain, colored-glass windows?” Raylan asked.

“Oh, you saw the videos already?” Art sounded disappointed.

“Ah, no. There’s a church like that in St. Louis. Vampire named Malcolm runs it,” Raylan lied.

“Church of Eternal Life.”

Tim’s eyes slid over to his partner picking up the lie, and he pushed to blank his mind, trying not to
give away his irritation to Rachel. He wondered when Raylan had dreamt with Boyd of the
vampire’s church.

“Makes sense,” Rachel said. “Boyd’s calling his church the Modern Eternal Life Church.”

Tim started a search for the church name and pulled up a web site.

“We were only gone two weeks,” Tim said, clicking on tabs for podcasts and videos of Boyd’s
televangelism.

“But he’s had a month in Harlan and he’s been busy,” Rachel said. “He’s got a daily televangelism
show that’s blowing up, especially across the Bible Belt.”

“His web site has videos,” Tim said.

Art stepped behind Tim and pointed to one on his screen. “Play that one,” he said.

Raylan rolled his chair back so he could see the screen through the glass partition between their
desks.

The video panned a congregation finishing a hymn in a church laid out as Raylan described it, white
walls, stained-glass windows with shapes of color but no Biblical scenes portrayed, and two rows of
pews filled with people—some were obviously newly dead vampires. They were unable to sing
without showing fangs. By their complexions, others in the congregation looked human to Tim.

Then the camera switched to a view of Boyd Crowder in a black jacket, white shirt buttoned up to
his neck standing behind a simple white pulpit preaching down fire and brimstone.

“All vampires are God’s creatures. And you know how I know that? Do you know how we
ALL know that? Why because God, God! In all HIS wisdom put you, my flock, my vampires on this
Earth to prove, to prove!, without a shaaadow of the smallest, most minuscule, the most microscopic
particle of a doubt to sinners and saved alike that He, HE exists.

Do I have a true believer who’ll step up to witness?

One true believer?

One, true, believer who shall step forward to testify to the power of our Lord? To prove the miracle
that He exists?”

Hands shot up throughout the pews, and Boyd practically vibrated as he stalked down the center
aisle. Just then a phone number, web site, and text flashed up across the bottom of the video telling
viewers to call for more information about finding “Eternal Life.”

He took a young woman with mousy brown hair by the hand and drew her from the pews to the
front of the church.
The congregation chanted, “Witness, witness, witness.”

“My flock,” Boyd called out, holding his hands up over his head. “Be at peace.”

The crowd calmed down, and Boyd motioned to the side. Tim recognized Dewey Crowe from the night Boyd had come to take Raylan from Bo Crowder. Dewey handed the woman what looked like a black velvet bag.

“Now, you just hold on to that for one little minute,” Boyd said, touching the woman’s cheek to wipe away a tear. “Whatcha name darlin’?”

“Ellie May,” she said, so quiet the sound system almost didn’t pick it up.

“Now Ellen May, are you a truuuue believer?” Boyd said. “Are you ready to test your faith right here in Harlan, Kentucky before God and the World that God is real?”

She nodded eagerly. “I know I’m not worthy but…”

“Now, no, no, no… we’ll have none, NONE of that. Aaaaall of y’all are worthy in His eyes!”

“Flock. I have before you the miracle. The very proof that God exists.”

Boyd paced the area before the pulpit and settled about ten feet from Ellie May.

“Ellen May, please take the cross from the bag,” Boyd told her.

“But Boyd… won’t it hurt you? you’re a vampire?”

“Don’t you worry about that, darlin’. You’re here to witness for aaaaall these good people—human and vampire alike—that God is real!”

“Pull out the cross and hold it up to me Ellen,” Boyd said.

Ellie May took a deep breath and pulled the cross from the bag and held it out before her.

Boyd smiled, his fangs bared for all the world to see and he must have tapped into some kind of vampire power… maybe he was trying to roll the young woman, but the cross glowed brightly.

“And behold the light of the Lord!” Boyd cried out, barely audible above the praise and “amens” reverberating from the pews.

The camera pulled in tight on Ellie May, her tears of joy streaking her enraptured face, as Boyd gently encouraged her to pull back the cross and wrap the cross back in the black velvet bag. He must have toned down the vampire powers because the cross faded. She looked surprised and lowered it, placing it back in the bag.

Tim had used a cross against vampires as a defensive weapon, but watching this, Boyd turned a weapon typically against vampires into something else entirely. Tim had no doubt this woman believed she had had a religious experience.

Dewey Crowe stepped forward and took the velvet-covered cross from the young woman. She fell to her knees in front of Boyd crying.

“There you have it! Here in Harlan and for all our viewers at home. Proof, PROOF that were it not for vampires, God’s very own creatures, we wouldn’t have the miracle of the knowledge that HE IS REAL!”
I’m gonna jump right out there and ask my viewers to call in to the number below. True believers—if you seed your faith with a donation now, you’ll double, triple, quintuple? No! not nearly enough. You’ll centuple—that’s your faith times one-hundred folks—you can seed your faith into Eternity by just calling the number below…”

Tim hit pause. “What the hell is he talking about?”

“He’s talking about seeding,” Rachel said.

“Seeding?” Raylan asked.

“They call it seed faith. Human televangelists promise if their viewers send in money, then God will pay it back to them—that they’re sowing a seed with that money that will come back to them in wealth or health or whatever it is they’ve been praying for.”

“If Boyd has Bo’s half mil, why’s he pushing for money?” Raylan asked. “Vampires deal in power.”

“That’s just it. If enough people from an area send him seed money in Harlan, either he’ll go himself or one of his ‘deacons’ will go to bring God’s lost sheep into the fold.”

“How exactly does he fold his followers in?” Raylan asked.

“By changing them into vampires. He’s not only promising eternal life,” Art said. “He’s delivering it.”

“Shit,” Raylan said.

They were all quiet for a moment.

“How is that any different from what Emmitt Arnett was doing extorting money from vampires he turned?” Tim said.

“It’s different because the IRS says it’s different,” Art said.

“The IRS rules for creating a church are very liberal and according to their guidelines ‘purposely broad and vague.’ There’s little oversight into how the money is collected and spent,” Rachel said. “Unless he’s doing something illegal, the IRS just isn’t interested.”

“Is he blood-oathing all these new vampire church members?” Raylan asked.

“We assume,” Rachel said and shrugged.

“Well, shit. He’s found a way to preach, take people’s money, and build up a shitload of power all at once.”

“And he’s doing it legally with tax exempt status,” Rachel said.

“I liked it better when he was blowing shit up and robbing banks,” Tim said.

“The bank robberies were before your time, Tim,” Art said. “By the time you got here, he was just blowing shit up.”

“Still liked it better.”

“I think I might reach out to that Malcolm in St. Louis and have a word,” Raylan said. “He’s run a vampire church quietly for years.”
“Might be good to get his take on it,” Art said. “Unless we can figure out if Boyd’s doing something illegal, our hands are tied.”

***

Raylan put in a call to Candice, the animation agent he used when he lived in Miami. A few metropolitan cities had agencies that specialized in selling the services of licensed animators willing to raise the dead for a fee. But Raylan had never been drawn to the idea working in one of those offices and raising several zombies a night, or spending all his nights running from graveyard to cemetery and back.

He liked being a US Deputy Marshal and legal vampire executioner. He might balk at the Executioner nickname, but secretly he got a kick out of it.

However, Raylan was more than an animator. While historically necromancers were few and far between, they possessed the power to not only animate but also to control the dead. Animators, by comparison, lacked the inherent power to rank as a necromancer. Most licensed animators raised zombies through some natural affinity and learned ritual—liked magic users or the ritual practice of Voudun practitioners. Whatever gave him his power—his mother’s family line or fate, he really had never been sure—it worked in Raylan like a natural talent drawing the dead to him if he didn’t keep his power in balance. If he didn’t use his necromancy, as the night before had reminded him, it could build up on him and backfire. So, he employed Candice’s services. She’d been local when he lived in Florida, but had always had a nationwide network of people seeking the talents of an animator. Her networking skills came in handy when he’d been assigned somewhere on a hunt for a length of time.

“Why Deputy Givens,” she purred through the phone, “it’s about time you hit me up.”

“’Lo Candice. Sorry ’bout that. I was injured in the line of duty, then took a vacation,” Raylan said.

When she didn’t reply, he asked, “You there?”

“Oh, sure. I just thought I heard you say you went on a vacation,” she said.

“Funny,” he said, turning his chair away from the glass with Tim listening on the other side. “You got anything for me? Sooner the better.”

“Maybe. Let me see who’s got some feelers out. You are still in Kentucky, right?”

“Lexington office. Will be for a bit.”

“Why sooner than later?” she asked. He could hear her typing.

“We had a midnight visitor last night.” That was his code for “if you don’t give me something to raise, my power is going to raise all kinds of unpleasant things until you do.”

“Oh lord. What was it this time?”

“Raccoon,” Raylan said. “My… um, partner, shot it. Stunk to high heaven.”

“Partner huh? This partner have anything to do with you going on the first vacation I’ve known you to take in… what? Six, seven years?”

“Might have,” he said.
“She pretty?”

“I think he is, yeah,” he said. “Helluva shot too.”

She laughed. “About time. I knew those all those reprobates you been picking of late wouldn’t stick. Got a picture?”

“Got a zombie for me to raise?”

“Send me a picture of your new squeeze, and I’ll send you a zombie.”

“Hold on,” Raylan said. He got out his phone, swiping the camera app open. “Hey Tim?”

“What?” Tim said, not looking up.

“Look at me.”

“What Raylan?” Tim raised narrowed eyes in Raylan’s direction as he snapped a picture.

“That’s it. Thanks,” Raylan said.

“Sending. Now where’s my zombie?” Raylan said.

“Who’d you send my picture to?” Tim asked, ignoring that Raylan was still on the phone.

Raylan held the bottom of the phone away from his mouth. “Candice. Animation agent. Won’t send me a zombie until I sent her a pic of you.”

“By all means then,” Tim said, waving a hand in a go-ahead/why not gesture. “I woulda smiled if you’d told me this would keep roadkill from throwing itself through our bedroom window tonight.”

“He sounds like just enough of a smart-ass to handle you,” Candice said. “Hmm. There’s a job out of Louisville that might be in your wheelhouse—since you’re so fond of giving your services away.”

“Just easier to work court cases. Ulterior motives are all out in the open,” he said.

Raylan usually raised zombies to settle court cases like will disputes or witnesses for LEOs. He’d learned long ago that some people didn’t have entirely altruistic reasons for wanting to raise a family member, lover, or spouse as a zombie.

“You know background-checking clients is part of my fee, Raylan.”

“Uh-huh, what’s the job?”

“Some students from the university up there have been looking for an animator for some research they’re doing. No one wants the job because they want to raise more than one zombie from a single grave—year of death unknown for some.”

“Doesn’t sound bad,” Raylan said.

“Not for you. A fair number of animators don’t have the chops for more than one zombie at a time. And…”

“And what?”

“They’re paying bupkis.”
“How low is bupkis?” Raylan asked.

She quoted him a number that was less than half the rate he charged for court work.

“We free to go to Louisville tonight to raise a zombie?” Raylan asked Tim, who replied with a short nod.

“You’re so domesticated,” she said. “Loading the pic. Oh, he’s cute.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Raylan murmured. “Go ahead with Louisville, but make it early. No later than nine to start.”

“Lordy, look at that nose,” she said, apparently still looking at Tim’s picture. “Tell me, Marshal, he well-endowed?” Candice asked in a hushed tone.

“I ain’t answerin’ that, Candice.”

“Raylan, they’ve done studies about how nasal-ocular distance is proportionate to penis—”

“Keep talking about that and I’ll hang up. E-mail me the details about tonight.”

“Raylan?”

“Candice,” he cautiously replied.

“You up for more zombies after this one?”

“Best line some up for me. Anywhere inside a three-hour drive from Lexington for, say, the next two weeks.”

“Will do. And you’re right. He is pretty,” she said, sounding somewhere between amused and sincere.

Raylan hung up on her.

“I take it we’re going to Louisville tonight,” Tim said after Raylan hit End.

“Yes,” Raylan said. Idly, he ran his finger up and down his nose from the bridge between his eyes to its tip thinking that Candice had to be full of shit.

“Your nose itch?” Tim asked.

“What?” Raylan peered over the glass at his partner, unable to keep his eyes off his lover’s face. Raylan licked his lips. Maybe she was right after all.

“Aww, shit.”

“What?” Raylan said.

“You’re gonna make me haul a chicken around in my truck, aren’t you?”

Raylan just smiled.

***

Raylan put a call into Malcolm’s church in St. Louis, leaving a message asking that the vampire master return his call when he woke up that night, then headed into Art’s office.
He hung in the chief’s doorway for a moment before wandering in.

“Say Art, don’t suppose you can assign me another Town Car now we’re back in town?” Raylan said.

“Little bit of a problem there.” Art grimaced. “Guy up in Ashland totaled a marshal vehicle and that office requisitioned a vehicle out one of the Eastern district offices. Your car was free so we sent that.”

“When you getting it back?”

“I thought Tim was driving a personal vehicle now,” Art said.

Raylan pressed on. “What about that SUV Tim was driving?”

“Sent it back to Covington,” Art said. “What do I need to assign you a company car for when you’re gonna be riding a desk for at least another week?”

“I…, uh, I have an appointment with the shrink this afternoon?”

“Get your boyfriend to take you. That’s what they do, I understand, if they’re good boyfriends.”

“Nevermind.”

“You saying Tim’s not a good boyfriend?” Art said.

“I heard that,” Tim yelled from his desk.

“Then you know you need to drop Raylan off at his shrink’s office this afternoon,” Art called back out.

The chief pointed at Raylan. “When you’re back on active duty, we’ll get your car back.”

“You heard that?” Raylan asked as he walked by Tim’s desk.

“Yeah. I have to go do a morgue staking this afternoon. I can drop you on my way.”

“Since when?” Raylan paused in front of his desk, mid-stride. When a victim with vampire bites came into the morgue accompanied with an advance medical directive signed and notarized stating they didn’t want to rise from the dead as a vampire, legal executioners were called in to stake them before they rose. Raylan hated them—morgue staking was too close to killing innocent people while they slept.

“Since now I guess,” Tim said, seemingly unperturbed.

“All legal executioners do morgue stakings,” Rachel said. “If we’re going to have two preternatural deputies assigned to this office, we can’t be sending all our morgue stakes up to Frankfort for someone else to handle.”

“Who’s the vampire executioner in Frankfort?” Raylan asked.

“No one. You two are it for the Eastern District. There’s a guy who’ll come down from Louisville from the Western District to do our stakings if we send them at least halfway in his direction.”

“Huh.”
“We don’t get that many,” Rachel said. “Most people who die with bites on them have them so they can rise from the dead.”

“You didn’t do morgue stakings in Miami?” Tim asked.

Raylan rounded his desk to sit down. “Not in years. We had a new guy who did that. Kind of like morning prison transport here.”

“Everyone here does everything,” Rachel said. “According to Art.”

“We don’t,” Tim said.

“No, you two don’t have to do morning prisoner transport, but you’re gonna do all the morgue stakings from now on.”

***

Raylan turned his computer off a full hour before his appointment and put his hat on.

“Come on,” he said to Tim, “we need to head out if you’re gonna drop me at my appointment.”

“I thought—” Tim started.

“That you had more time. But you don’t.” Raylan jerked his head in the direction of the door.

Tim didn’t look any less confused but stood up, slipping on his jacket. “All right. Hey Art, I’m heading out to play carpool for Raylan and then to the morgue. We’ll be back—”

“—tomorrow morning,” Raylan finished.

“In the morning,” Tim said, shrugging.

Art nodded, but Rachel’s eyes tracked them as they left. “You two behave.”

The expression on her face said she knew better.

***

“What was that all about?” Tim asked.

“I’d like a visit with Dr. Lillian while you handle the bite victim.”

“Then what am I gonna do while you’re at the shrink?”

“Wait, like a good boyfriend.”

Tim rolled his eyes.

Tim parked behind the county coroner’s office. He was relieved to see the door wasn’t standing open this visit as they walked around to the front door of the white brick warehouse-style building.

They showed the receptionist their badges and told her they were there for a morgue staking. She asked them to have a seat and wait for Dr. Lillian to escort them back.

“What are we doing here?” Tim asked. They sat together in the empty reception area.

“You’re doing a morgue staking. I’m just riding along with my partner, visiting our friend the
“coroner,” Raylan said, he turned his hat over in his hands.

“Uh-huh,” Tim grunted. Raylan was up to something. “You ready to tell me when you dreamt with Boyd about that church?”

Raylan avoided his eyes. “Caught that did you?”

“Well?” he asked, his voice tight from how he’d set his jaw in frustration.

“New Mexico. He wanted to know where I’d gone. I was able to block him by shielding,” Raylan said.

“Kind of hypocritical, don’t you think?” Tim bit out the words.

“Okay,” Raylan started, his tone almost conciliatory. “I blocked him, all right? There wasn’t anything to tell.”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“Figuring that out just now?”

“Nope.”

Dr. Lillian led them into the back. Raylan walked side-by-side with the her while Tim followed behind, annoyed with himself at how engaging he found the two strips of denim between the back pockets and belt of his partner’s faded Levi’s. They framed the curve of his ass in a way that drew and held his eyes. The coroner escorted them down a long hallway. When they reached the cold room where the morgue officials stored the body Tim would stake, Raylan shot him a knowing look and that flirtatious closed-mouth smile of his.

Tim wondered what he’d given away with his scent and narrowed his eyes at Raylan in response. Just because Tim lusted after him, Raylan wasn’t off the hook.

Dr. Lillian cleared her throat.

“I’ve got the paperwork right here,” she handed Tim a file folder. “This is your first morgue staking in Kentucky?”

“Right. Raylan and I’ll be doing them for a while,” Tim said.

“All right, well, it’s good I have you both here today then. Only have to run through this once. We stake vampire victims whose cause of death is accidental or not believed to be associated with foul play. The body must have a standard advanced medical directive and the state of Kentucky requires the signature of two witnesses and a notary. The form must have the notary’s stamp or seal.”

She showed them both the advanced directive form, pointing to the signatures and notary seal.

“This is pretty standard,” Tim said.

She nodded. “Most states are similar. Kentucky requires the two wits and a notary, though. States vary. Staking without that… well, you know what that leads to.”

“A murder charge,” Tim confirmed. Vampires had the same rights as humans. It wasn’t unheard of for an executioner to mistakenly stake a human who’d otherwise planned to rise as a vampire.

“Only two recent cases—both were overturned twice within the last three years,” Raylan said. “The
incidents were ruled accidental.”

“And those executioners also lost their jobs and had their lives turned upside down as a result by a murder investigation and court trial,” Dr. Lillian said, ramping up for an argument.

“We agree with you,” Tim said, holding up his hands.

“Good. Either myself or one of the senior medical examiners will be present to confirm the preliminary cause of death findings if we don’t already know the official cause.”

“Why’s that?

“If we autopsy a human in the process of turning, remove their organs, including their hearts…”

“Then you’ll be the ones up on murder charges,” Raylan said.

“Yes, exactly.”

“And if there’s a suspicion of foul play?” Raylan asked.

“We can proceed with the staking if the deceased has a notarized cause of death exemption form with the advanced directive. Otherwise, we send the case to the state attorney’s office who will put it before a judge to make the call.”

“What’s the deal with this guy? How did he die?” Tim asked.

“In flagrante delicto,” she said. “He had a young vampire lover and a very human wife.”

Raylan pushed his hat back, and Tim swallowed back a laugh.

“His wife is not amused.”

Tim nodded more seriously. “Understandable, you sure there wasn’t any foul play? Vampire lover and all, he might have wanted to change up.”

“Very sure. A confirmed heart attack.”

Raylan stepped back with Dr. Lillian while Tim pulled out his stake and mallet.

“Will I need to remove the head?” Tim asked.

“Staking the heart will be sufficient,” she said. “We’ll move him to autopsy next.”

“Say Dr. Lillian…,” Raylan started.

Tim busied himself with his executioner’s bag.

“Yes Deputy.”

“Following up on our previous conversations a few weeks back, why is it you don’t smell like any were animal I know of?”

She hissed. “Deputy!”

Tim winced. His partner really was an asshole.

“You can trust Tim,” Raylan said.
“That is not the point,” she said.

“You smell like nothing.”

“And how is it that you know I smell like nothing? My understanding was that you killed Bo Crowder and freed yourself from his vampire marks,” she said. “Yes, I heard about that. So unless another vampire has... Wait, has another vampire marked you, Deputy?”

Tim turned to watch them. Raylan had grown quiet, answering her with silence.

“Dr. Lillian,” Tim said. “I’m going to cut to the chase. If we show you ours, will you show us yours? My partner is not going to give up trying to figure out what flavor of lycanthrope you are.” Tim shot Raylan a disapproving look.

“All right. What do you have in mind?” she said.

“Raylan is a necromancer. Maybe we can agree that if we keep your secrets, you’ll keep ours?”

“I didn’t know they still existed,” Dr. Lillian said, eyeing Raylan. “I am part of the local Rodere.”

Raylan looked at Tim and given his family history in hunting lycanthropes, he answered the unspoken question, “Wererat.”

“You can’t smell me because in animal form, female rats are very difficult to scent—they’ve evolved to protect themselves since females carry young. Male rats and male wererats have a stronger scent, more recognizable. In animal form to attract a mate. Well, maybe that’s in both forms,” she said.

“We were hoping to get in touch with the local wolf pack about an open case,” Raylan said. “A vampire master from Frankfort drained about a month back—had his heart removed by the claws of a partially shifted wolf. According to DNA anyway.”

“You said as much last time you visited.”

“We’d just like to have a word with the local pack,” Raylan pushed.

“I can ask our Rat King to extend your request to the local Ulfric—the wolf pack leader. If he declines, you’re on your own.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and commenting. xoxox
Chapter 4

By seven, Tim and Raylan were on the road heading toward Louisville.

“Why no chickens?” Tim asked. Not that he was complaining. He’d volunteered to pull the locking cover off the bed liner of his pickup and was prepared to bungee-cord Raylan’s wire chicken crates to the top of his gun safes.

“Customer is supplying the sacrifice—they want to raise more than one zombie. One might be dead more than a hundred years.”

“Might be?” Tim asked, thinking Raylan shouldn’t be allowed to use the word “might” and “zombie” together in one sentence. “How do they not know?”

“It’s a group from the university up there. Grad students or something moving old graves, want to find out if animation’d be a way for them to map old cemeteries with unknown graves.”

“Would it be?” Tim asked.

“Necromancy would be better,” Raylan said. “Too much trouble and expense to raise everything in a cemetery to ask it how long it’s been down there.”

“You can raise more than one zombie at a time? And one that old?”

“I can. Most animators can’t. With a big enough sacrifice? Should be able to manage both. Not to mention… at the moment… I’m humming.”

“Humming how?” Tim asked.

“Pent-up power I guess? Don’t usually go this long without raising a zombie. We’re probably lucky you didn’t pick a house near a graveyard, else something bigger than a raccoon mighta come through the window last night.”

It was pushing eight when Raylan’s cell phone rang.

“Givens.”

“Deputy Givens? This is Malcolm speaking, from the Church of Eternal Life. I have a message here requesting I contact you as soon as possible.”

Tim shot Raylan a questioning look.
“Thank you for calling Malcolm. I’m with my partner Deputy Gutterson, do you mind if I put you on speaker?”

“Of course.” Raylan hit the Speaker button and Malcolm continued. “Who am I question the Executioner and Death? I hope this isn’t anything to do with any of my parishioners.”

Tim raised an eyebrow at the knowledge that Malcolm had recognized them.

“Not at such, no. We’re currently working in Kentucky and wanted to have a word about a local vampire who’s decided to take up your line of work.”

“Ah. You would be speaking of a Mr. Boyd Crowder,” Malcolm said.

“You’ve heard of him, then?” Tim said.

“Why yes, Deputy Gutterson,” Malcolm said. “It’s an unusual situation. Ours has been the fastest growing church in the country since I opened it twenty-five years ago. We’ve attracted more members than any other religion or denomination of Christianity in America. In the past, I have had vampires contact me about starting a branch of our church in their part of the country, which after some trial and error has worked out very well. But this is the first time I’ve been presented with… competition, I suppose you’d call it.”

“How so?” Raylan asked.

“We offer our human church members the opportunity to pass over into eternal life while remaining in this realm,” Malcolm said. “Our creed is simple, and our doctrine and discipline are quite conservative. We teach our parishioners to live a pious life, choosing a peaceful life rather than to succumb to the hunger and baser instincts that many vampires fall prey to.”

“What does that mean?” Tim asked.

“May I speak plainly?” Malcolm replied.

Tim rolled his eyes.

“Sure,” Raylan said.

“Boyd Crowder is selling something vastly different than the teaching of our church.”

“Go on.”

“Our culture is not the same. I feel strongly that our church members hold themselves to a higher moral standard. Boyd Crowder forces submission from his church members.”

“How is he doing that?” Raylan asked.

“Continuing the barbaric practice of blood-oathing his church members and subjugating them to him to force them to meet whatever moral standard he prescribes to. I can’t speak to what that standard might be.”

“Wait, wait… back up a second. You don’t blood-oath the vampires in your church?” Raylan said, alarmed.

“No, our church requires members to keep to a high moral standard of their own accord, and they choose to hold themselves to it, just like they did in their human lives.”
“But how do you control them?” Tim asked.

“Why Marshals, I don’t. They control themselves.”

“You sure about that?” Tim said.

“Are you saying I don’t know my parishioners?”

“No, no. Not at all. We’re just trying to get a leg up on what Boyd’s getting himself into down here,” Raylan said, trying to smooth out the conversation.

“Boyd Crowder is selling redemption in exchange for power and money to both humans, as well as new and old vampires alike.”

“And that’s different from your church,” Tim stated, sounding doubtful.

“There’s no need to be insulting. In the past, we used to practice door-to-door evangelism, sending our human church members out to share our message.”

“Like Jehovah’s witnesses?” Raylan asked.

“Yes, quite similar. But times have changed,” Malcolm said. “Humans are so accessible through your new technologies. It’s not something vampires take well to I’m afraid. Old ones, anyway.”

“And you’re an old vampire, Malcolm?” Raylan asked.

“I heard you could tell a vampire’s age, Executioner,” Malcolm said. His words sounded more crisp as if he’d grown irritated with them.

“Not over the phone,” Raylan said.

“At any rate, door-to-door evangelism and Sunday morning broadcasts of my Saturday evening sermons are not much competition for Mr. Crowder’s approach,” Malcolm said, never answering the question of his age. “His evangelism is far more flagrant. By failing to instill the kind of moral code our church offers its members, he is offering them forgiveness with one hand and more sin with the other. He is making promises he cannot hope to keep.”

“What kind of promises?” Tim asked.

“To humans, he is offering eternal life.”

“Your church does that, doesn’t it?” Tim said, repeating his previous question. “I’m sorry, I just don’t see how your church is different from Boyd Crowder’s.”

“It is very different. He is promising his vampires that their souls have been saved.”

“And you don’t think that’s true?” Raylan asked.

A silence stretched out between them long enough that Raylan finally prompted him, “You still there Malcolm?”

“I am here. I believe it is possible for a vampire to fulfill the tenets of Christianity and to love God, but I am unsure that that love can be reciprocated. I am unsure our souls are not eternally damned.”

“You don’t think vampires will go to heaven when their souls leave their bodies?” Tim asked.
“My soul leaves my body every day, Deputy. I’ve never known it to go anywhere remotely close to heaven.”

Another silence stretched out. “So, you’re agnostic?” Tim said.

“No, I am Christian.”

“Malcolm, about how many members does your church have?” Raylan asked.

“Oh, five or six hundred nationwide,” he replied.

“Any jumped ship of late?” Raylan asked.

“I… I can’t say,” Malcolm said.

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t, Marshal,” he said. “Did you discover what you were hoping for here? I have a service starting shortly.”

Raylan thanked him and hit End.

They drove for a full minute in silence. “Did I hear that right? That guy changed five or six hundred vampires without taking any measures to try to control them?” Tim asked, shocked.

“And we thought Boyd was bad.”

***

Tim turned off into the entrance of Scherschel Cemetery on the west side of Louisville.

“Candice’s email said to pull up to the gate, call this guy Travis, and they’ll come let us in,” Raylan said, swiping open his email on his phone. “I’ll read the number, you dial.”

Tim pulled out his phone and punched in the numbers as Raylan read them aloud. “I can see lights through the trees. They’ve got some spotlights set up.”

Raylan rolled down his window. “Sounds like a generator.”

“I thought you said these kids didn’t have any money.”

Raylan shrugged. “Candice said they didn’t.”

“Looking for Travis. I’ve got your animator here at the front gate. You gonna come let us in so we can do this?” Tim asked, his voice as gruff as his manner.

A few minutes later, a tall, thin man jogged up the wheel tracks in the grass. The gravel ended a couple feet past the gate. This cemetery was old enough that the sparse gravel was worn into the disused road so that it seemed more like a dirt trail in the grass that a road winding through the cemetery. To Raylan, that wasn’t a good sign. He wondered if one hundred years wasn’t a guess on the short side of the graveyard’s age.

Travis waved at Tim through the driver-side window. Tim hit the button to lower it.

“Hey—you Raylan?”
“Nope, he’s Raylan. I’m Tim. Got an ID?”

Travis’ smile fell. “Oh. Oh. I didn’t even think of that,” he said. He pulled a wallet from his back pocket and passed a Kentucky Driver’s License to Tim. He handed it off to Raylan who flipped on the overhead light on his side.

“Looks good. Where are you set up?”

“I’ll let y’all drive through, then I need to lock it again. Our prof threatened our lives if we left it open since we’ve got that cow and all—”

“You have a cow?” Raylan interrupted, alarmed.

“Miss Candice said we needed a big sacrifice.”

“A cow is huge.”

“Tell me about it.” Travis’ eyes were wide in the darkness.

“No, a cow is a huge death, a big sacrifice for this kind of animation,” Raylan clarified.

“We’ll drive through and wait for you to lock up,” Tim said, “then you can climb in the back and point us to where we’re going.”

“And tell me why you think you need a cow.”

Travis stepped back with a sheepish look on his face as Tim pulled away from him, driving through into the cemetery and idled waiting on Travis to lock the gate behind them.

“They want you to sacrifice a cow?” Tim asked quietly, disbelief in his voice.

Raylan shook his head. “That’s an awfully big death.”

The man opened the driver’s side door of the crew cab and sat behind Tim.

“Thanks for the ride. Just head up the path there in the direction of the light there. There’s a right turn coming up on at the fork. We brought some lights to set up to help with the video.”

“How old exactly is this zombie that it warrants a cow as a sacrifice?” Raylan asked. He shifted in his seat so he could see Travis.

“Ahh. Well, we don’t exactly know. You’re not our first animator. We hired one who couldn’t raise anything from the graves we researched.”

“How come you don’t know who’s buried here?” Tim asked.

“The cemetery is one of several in the Louisville area that was owned by a company that was exposed in the ’80s for reusing burial sites. It closed after the scandal, and the stewardship of the cemetery has been controlled by the courts since technically no one owns it anymore. State decided to take it over for a redevelopment agency through eminent domain and want us to move the graves. Take a right up here where the road forks—then just follow the road to the lights and find a place to park on the side of the road. We’ve pulled all the records available, mapped the cemetery, but we’re not sure who all is down there,” Travis said. “We found two entries for the grave marked ‘OG’—which means ‘old grave.’”

“So you have one known zombie and two unknowns?” Raylan said.
“We think so,” Travis said.

Tim parked the truck. His lights illuminated a cow tied to a tree.

“Who told you a cow was necessary?” Raylan said.

“The last guy we had out here. Dr. Dallas had it brought in. She said your agent confirmed you’d be able to work with it—since we’d already spent the money. I think she doesn’t want to chance the sacrifice being too small again. Come on. I’ll introduce you to the rest of the research team.”

“We’ll be there in a few minutes. We have some equipment we need to set up,” Raylan said.

Travis went over to join his team. They started turning on more halogen work lights. The lights lit up the immediate and surrounding work area, and Raylan could see where they’d gridded off the area with stakes and white tape or string. Some square grids had already been excavated down a few feet. While the light made it easy to see what work the team had been up to, it made Raylan feel like he was blind to the rest of the night surrounding them. Everything else was darker than their little pocket of light.

“I’m not crazy about these lights,” Tim said.

“Me either.” Raylan pulled his animation kit out of the back of the cab. He peeled off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt, yanking it out of his jeans. “Wish I’d known they were going with a cow. I would have packed a bigger container to catch the blood.” He showed Tim the plastic food storage container he picked up at Kroger to collect chicken blood. “This won’t be big enough.”

Tim strode over to where one of the grad students who was pulling video equipment out of the backseat of her car. He peered into her windows and pointed to an extra-large McDonald’s cup in her drink carrier.

“You done with that?”

“With what?” she asked.

“Your drink,” Tim said, opening the car door and reaching in. He jiggled the half-full cup.

“I uh—” she started, clearly thrown off.

“Good,” Tim said, popping the lid and pouring the contents out into the grass where she was parked. “Raylan needs it for the blood.”

She clammed up, her eyes wide in shock.

Tim wandered back over to Raylan and handed him the empty cup earning a questioning glance.

“For the blood,” Tim said.

“Huh, it’ll help a little,” he said. “Thanks.”

Raylan had stripped down to jeans and his wife-beater and was pulling on white Tyvek coveralls over his clothes.

“Have you had those all along?” Tim asked.

“In Miami, I keep coveralls in my trunk along with a pair of snake boots. I talked the crime techs out of a couple suits until I can order some online.”
“When did you do that?” Tim asked.

“The two weeks I was riding the desk before we left for New Mexico.”

“Huh. I never noticed.”

“Good. Maybe I can get the drop on you after all,” Raylan said. “Christmases and birthdays are lookin’ up.”

Tim didn’t seem at all convinced.

“You swipe those from one of the lady techs didn’t you?” Tim eyed the three inches of jeans and boots sticking out the bottom of the white Tyvek covering his legs.

Raylan shrugged. “Yeah, not ideal. I’ll have to stand back when I sacrifice the cow.”

Tim scrunched his face up. Whatever he was going to say was cut off by a throat clearing.

“Mr. Givens—if you’d needed something, you could have asked instead of scaring one of my students. They’re already on edge with the evening’s agenda ahead of them.”

A short woman with mousy brown hair held out a white five-gallon pickle bucket with a peeling sticker on its side that read “Sysco—Crinkle Cut Hamburger Pickles.”

“An actual pickle bucket?” Raylan asked.

“For the blood, I expect,” she said. “My brother-in-law owns a diner. The pickles are long gone, but there’s probably some cemetery dirt dusting the sides. We dump all dirt into buckets as we excavate, then we screen it for bones and artifacts. I trust the dirt won’t interfere with your ritual, Mr. Givens?”

“Deputy, actually, Deputy Marshal Givens,” Raylan said, taking the container. “Thanks. I wasn’t expecting such a large sacrifice.”

“Dr. Dallas,” she said, holding out her hand to Raylan. “You can call me Dallas. I actually wanted to thank you for agreeing to help us.”

He took her hand and was shocked at her firm grip. It wasn’t preternaturally strong, but it definitely fell firmly into the category of confident.

“This is my partner, Deputy Tim Gutterson,” Raylan said.

She offered Tim her hand, and he eyed it a bit surprised.

“I thought we should go over what we’re doing here tonight,” Dallas said. “Come on over and meet my team.”

Raylan and Tim followed her over to an open tent with a work area set up. A table had a map splayed out on it.

“What do you know about the history of Scherschel Cemetery?”

“Not much,” Raylan said. “Just what Travis told us driving in.”

“That funeral company that originally owned this cemetery left four different maps dating from 1880, 1907, 1962 and 1984. My department has worked diligently through the years to steward as many of the records by getting them assigned to the University so families who are looking for lost ancestors
have a place to turn.”

“And what does that have to do with zombies?” Tim asked.

“I’m a bioarchaeologist and these are graduate students in our program working on degrees in the field,” she said. “Our business is the study of human remains. With the legalization of animation, that practice has become a method that can now be viewed as credible when it was considered ritual magic in the past with no part in the scientific field. We’ve been tasked with moving as many interred bodies from this cemetery as we can find and re-interring the bones in another location. Since the State of Kentucky is funding the move, we are tying some research projects to the dig.”

Tim shifted at the length of her explanation. Raylan moved closer to him, brushing his arm to nudge a little patience his way.

“Our research team has been split up into several groups that have specifically conducted parts of a comparative study of methods for determining and plotting marked and unmarked graves. Team one used public, church, and what funeral records still exist to create our first map of the cemetery. Then we moved on to map the cemetery using ground penetrating radar and geophysical analysis.”

“I know what ground penetrating radar is—seeing bodies underground. But what do you mean by geophysical analysis?” Raylan asked.

“After running the ground penetrating radar, that team used a Geonics EM-31 Terrain Resistivity/Conductivity Meter,” she said.

Raylan and Tim eyed each other, then turned back to her. Raylan shrugged.

“It uses electromagnetic tech to detect variation of subsurface soils,” she said.

When they didn’t answer her again, she added. “We can tell how much salt, clay, moisture, and the temperature of the soil.”

“I don’t see how that tells you who’s buried here,” Tim said.

“It doesn’t.”

“Or how many,” Raylan added.

“Yes, that is one of the limits of both methods. When there is more than one body buried in a grave, the ground penetrating radar can’t determine the number of bodies—and often tree roots look like bones. The Resistivity/Conductivity Meter tells us if the ground was disturbed. Another stage of the study was to use a probe test to locate possible unmarked graves, then map them.”

“A probe?” Tim asked.

“The dirt around a grave’ll settle differently. If a body was buried there, the dirt is softer and the color of the dirt is different,” Raylan said.

“Oh, you know about probing and grave stains?” Dallas asked, sounding pleased.

“I’ve been around cemeteries all my life,” Raylan said. “You pick things up.”

Dallas nodded.

“What is it you’re trying to accomplish here with Raylan’s help?” Tim asked.
“We targeted a grave site we knew should have more than one body buried there from the other tests we ran and confirmed against our records. Then we originally hired an animator to raise the bodies from that burial site,” she said, then frowned.

“But the animator you hired didn’t have the juice to raise the bodies,” Raylan said. “That’s why you have the cow.”

She smiled. “Exactly.”

“Can’t you just do that thing where you sense the dead, tell them where to dig and we’ll head out?” Tim asked.

“Wait,” Dallas said, her focus sharpening on the first words she’d found interesting from him. “What do you mean?”

Raylan winced and shook his head at Tim. “Most animators can sense if there is a body buried under a gravestone.”

“You can do this?” she sounded excited.

“Sure, I could walk the graveyard for you—probably tell you where there are dead buried and how many. I can sense remaining ghosts, too, but that’s a different kind of power. I can’t tell you anything about ghosts. It depends on how big the cemetery is,” Raylan said. “But I don’t know that I could do it after raising and returning three zombies into the ground.”

“Would you be willing to come back and do that for us?” she asked.

“I could do it tonight if you wanted. It would be less invasive than raising the dead. Fair bit easier on the cow, too.”

Dallas pressed her lips together. “I’m afraid we’re running short on time.”

“How do you mean?” Raylan asked.

“You’ll be raising the zombies out of lot 142. Since we don’t know if there are any living ancestors, we filed a public notice of our intentions, then obtained a court order allowing us to employ an animator to raise these zombies, question them and return them to their resting place. Later, they will be moved and reburied in individually marked graves,” she said, handing Raylan the court order.

“If the state is moving the bodies, why do you need a court order to animate them?” Tim asked.

“HIPAA,” Raylan and Dallas answered at the same time.

“HIPAA made the call about ten years back to include animation under health privacy,” Raylan said, looking through the court order. “This expires this week.” He passed it off to Tim.

“We were in the process of petitioning for more time when your agent called us this afternoon,” she said. “We still have a lot of burials to uncover. It takes us a full day to recover one body—it’s exacting and slow work. The state wanted to break ground this summer. If you could show us where to dig, then we’d be able to finish far more quickly. And accurately.”

“Just call Candice and arrange a night,” Raylan said.

“What’s with all the lights?” Tim asked.

“The students are positioning video cameras to record the animation ritual and then we’ll interview
the zombies to determine their identities and as much about their lives and deaths as we can,” she said. “Perhaps find a line on the family we may be able to locate.”

Tim and Raylan shared a look. “Dr. Dallas, I am sure that Candice informed you that I don’t allow anyone to video record my animations.”

Raylan could tell he’d brought her up short. He wasn’t sure if it was because she was pushing the limits of his rules or she just hadn’t been informed.

“But Deputy, for research purposes…”

“Dr. Dallas, Raylan is a law enforcement officer with a special dispensation from the director to animate bodies from time to time. There’s a reason law enforcement agencies don’t have photos of law enforcement on their websites,” Tim said. “It’s simply not a safe practice.”

“But…” she said.

“Why is it you need to record the animations?” Raylan asked.

“The academic world has a hard time swallowing a method described as ‘he raised them with magic,’ even if animators are now licensed professionals,” she said.

“If you video recorded the zombies and not Raylan, would that work?” Tim asked.

“That would do,” she said. “Would be willing to allow that Deputy?”

Raylan sighed. “So long as you understand that Tim here is going to review every frame. Any video I show up in, he’ll delete,” he said.

Tim’s accompanying smile was feral.

“Agreed.”

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Raylan walked the cow off into the darkness where the research team members couldn’t see them from their positions around the lit-up grave site.

“You might want to stand back,” Raylan said.

“What if she panics?” Tim asked.

“I’ll be quick,” Raylan said, taking a position alongside the cow. He stroked her soft coat to calm her and feel around for her carotid, and pushed away feelings of regret. He’d killed before and would again. He couldn’t afford to get soft over a ritual sacrifice—but logic did little to ease the knot in his stomach.

According to the government’s Humane Slaughter Act, since he was performing a ritual slaughter and couldn’t shock her out of consciousness or the sacrifice would be negated, he had to sever both carotids in one strike to be within the legal parameters of the law. The trick with a cow was he’d also need to cut deeply enough through her windpipe to reach the arteries.

He took a deep breath and focused on the cow’s well-being and coming death.

Raylan breathed through the pulsing in the air from the cow’s death. He let the exsanguination fill the bucket Dallas had given him, standing back so the blood didn’t splash on his boots. He would have
been able to fill at least two buckets with how much blood a cow this size typically had coursing through her veins.

Tim stood by grim-faced. When the bucket was full and the blood continued to pour out onto the ground from the now collapsed cow, Tim’s hand resting on his sidearm drew Raylan’s eye.

“You can’t.” Raylan said.

“Why not?” Tim’s voice was quiet, a whisper in the darkness.

“You’ll negate the sacrifice,” Raylan said, knowing Tim wanted to put the animal out of the misery of a slow death. “She’ll have died for nothing.”

Tim swallowed. Raylan wondered how anyone, especially Peter, could think his lover was a sociopath.

Raylan carried the bucket over to the grave site dubbed lot #142 as slowly as he could, trying not to spill the blood over the edge, then found a level place to rest the bucket.

His instincts were to wipe his hands on the Tyvek coveralls, but he figured the blood would stand out against the white material and freak out the students surrounding the grave site. He walked back over to grab a stained hand towel he kept in his animator’s kit and wiped the excess blood from his hands and machete before he brought the bag containing the kit over to the grave.

Raylan pulled his tub of salve out of his bag, applied it to his arms and face, then slipped a hand inside the coveralls and underneath his tank, and rubbed some into the skin over his heart. He then smeared some on Neely Taft Warfield’s gravestone.

He found he didn’t have to do more than wonder how many people had been buried under Warfield’s marker and his necromancy stretched out on its own effortlessly to find out: three.

“Dr. Dallas, you’re right. There are three people buried here,” Raylan said. He walked the area of the grave. “One directly under the stone, probably Warfield. Another close to that one… the other…” He stepped to the side, nearly over to the next grave. “The third one is over here for some reason.”

She wandered closer. “Yes. We’ve found in other parts of the cemetery the older burials are buried diagonal to the newer graves. We believe the what’s left of the gravel in the roads is broken up headstone from the first or second generation of burials. The first generation burials have been on an angle—as if the rows were laid out in later years following a different map.”

Raylan thought about that. “I’ll widen the power circle.”

“Tim, you want inside the circle?” Raylan said.

“What’ll that get me again?” Tim asked.

“You’d be able to command the zombies.”

“Isn’t that your job?”

Raylan squinted his eyes in Tim’s direction. “Yes. But in case…”

“In case of what?” Tim said. “Am I going to need my shotgun?”

Raylan thought about it for a moment. He could feel three dead under them and the night crackling around him. He was ready to draw the circle and raise these zombies. Then, Tim walked away.
“Where you going?”

“If you have to think about it that hard, I need another gun.”

“I have a sawed-off in my kit,” Raylan mumbled. He’d left his Glock in the truck when he put his Tyvek suit on.

Raylan dipped the purloined cup into the bucket and started pouring blood in a circle around the grave, purposely going wide and encompassing a few feet on the other side of the gravestone so he and Tim could step back out of the camera frame.

When Tim got back with his rifle, Raylan pointed out where he should stand behind Warfield’s marker, out of the path where he thought the zombies would rise.

“Dr. Dallas? They’re going to come up here, here…” Raylan walked to the third interred body. “And here, if you want to tell your students where to aim their cameras.”

Raylan finished pouring the blood circle behind where Tim was standing and felt it snap closed around them. He wanted to bounce on the balls of his feet like a little kid. His necromancy was pressing against his skin, ready to arc out of him and into the dead around him.

Raylan dipped a finger in the cow blood and dotted Tim’s forehead, both cheeks, then slipped his fingers into the neck of Tim’s shirt and smeared some blood across the skin over his heart.

“Hey, watch it. Cold hands,” Tim said, curling away from Raylan’s hands, then looking down. “I liked this shirt.”

“Black’s not going to show the blood,” Raylan said.

Raylan began the ritual, standing beside the gravestone. “Hear me, Neely Taft Warfield. Hear me… all buried beneath me…”

He got as far as the one name he knew and the location of the others when he stretched out with his power, opening that part of himself where his death magic was seated, only to have a wave of power overtake him.

Raylan fell to his knees beside Warfield’s gravestone. In his mind’s eye, he saw Boyd, felt Boyd. The vampire was blood-oathing at his eerily plain church with the blank white-washed walls, soaking in power from the vampires he was blood-oathing that spread out from the master vampire to the servant, then back to the master before circling to the servant—like an infinity mirror, only instead of the image getting smaller and smaller, the ricocheting power seemed to charge Raylan’s necromancy into a frenzy.

The rush was furious and cool—so cold it burned his veins, and the release made Raylan feel like he was a kid again, seeing white spots behind his lids from his first orgasm.

Raylan? Boyd asked in his mind. Why? I didn’t know you cared. Or I wouldn’t have…

Raylan saw Ava naked, moving under him… only he’d never been with her. He must be experiencing Boyd’s thoughts, his memories. Then, Raylan saw her neck where she carried Boyd’s bite, and Raylan felt Boyd’s satisfaction in seeing it there. It was the same satisfaction Raylan felt when he marked Tim’s neck, and his power liked that thought so his mind flicked through memories of Tim coming… and Raylan clamped down on this thoughts, not wanting to share any part of Tim with Boyd.
I don’t care, Raylan thought, his mind swept up in the power building between them made worse by the sacrifice of the cow, Raylan’s pent-up necromancy, and the influx of whomever Boyd had just tied to him metaphysically.

Raylan did the only thing he knew how to do with power, he sank his hands into the ground, “I call you from your grave. By blood, magic, and steel, I call you. Arise, awaken. I command you to rise.”

He felt the power pour out of him, rejoicing in the freedom to seek out the dead around him. He could feel them underneath him. Warfield was ready to rise. So were the other two zombies who were laid to rest beneath him.

With the excess power sloughed off into the ground, Raylan became aware that he could hear Tim calling his name and then felt his warmth on his shoulder, touching his neck, grounding him.

“Ray, talk to me,” Tim said.

“I’m all right,” Raylan said first, raising his head. He realized at some point he’d closed his eyes, he was on his knees, with them spread wide, his fingers buried in the grass, and his head hanging as if it weighed fifty pounds.

He opened his eyes to look up at Tim, who had crouched down in front of him. “We really didn’t need that cow. What’d I raise?”

“Zombies. Lots of zombies.”

“Shit.”

Tim rose to his feet and held a hand out to Raylan, so he could tug him up after him.

The three zombies Raylan meant to raise were standing patiently waiting for him, empty vessels of flesh remade whole by his death magic. They lacked consciousness and would until Raylan fed them his blood. He grabbed his machete and drew it across the back of his wrist. He let them feed on his living blood from the cut.

“Dr. Dallas?” Raylan called her over. “I need you to have the students step back from the zombies. Send them to the tent?”

“Guys? Head over to the tent,” she said. A couple of the seven students standing around filming the zombies surrounding them groaned. Raylan also noticed that a few of the others moved quickly, looking relieved.

Dallas came closer to the blood line and stopped, drawing his attention. Then, she stepped across it closer to him, and he exhaled. The last thing he needed that night was for the good doctor to be something magical enough that she couldn’t cross the power circle. The circle would keep out most flavors of magical practitioners and beings aside from the human and mundane. Animators drew them to keep out demons and other nasty forces that would like nothing better than to take control of a freshly dead, reanimated corpse.

With that thought, Raylan turned to go to work on the rest of what he’d raised. He grabbed his machete and his animator’s kit.

“I command all of you to answer Dr. Dallas’ questions,” Raylan said to the zombies. He turned to the bioarchaeologist and Tim. “I’m going to go see what I can do about putting everything else to rest.”
“I wish you wouldn’t,” Dallas said. “At least not until we find out who they were and when they lived and died. And hopefully from which grave they rose from.”

Raylan sighed and stepped out of the circle but walked back toward Tim. “Can you stay in the circle with the doctor? You can command the zombies.”

“You don’t need me out there?” Tim asked.

Raylan scanned the immediate area and shook his head. There were about a dozen zombies unearthed from the perimeter of Warfield’s grave. “I just need to put them down.”

Raylan stalked over to the tent and waved at the girl Tim had tormented into giving up her cup. She had a video camera on a tripod. “You, Cup Girl, come on. Bring your camera.”

She shot him a withering look but followed him.

“You have a name?” he said.

“I’m Rashida. What are we doing?”

“You are going document who these zombies were, then I’m putting them back.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. “Why me?”

“My partner owes you a drink. Figured it was the least I could do,” Raylan said, stopping a few feet shy of the grouping of zombies closest to their research tent. The zombies stood stock still, waiting for Raylan’s commands. No one was home inside them. “You’re looking at about quarter of a million bucks worth of zombies. On the low end.”

“I guess that makes us even,” she said.

Raylan turned to her in surprise.

“What? He pitched my sweet tea. I was thirsty and your partner’s kind of scary.”

“And a cemetery full of zombies aren’t?”

“Different kind of scary.”

“Fair point.”

Raylan worked one grave at a time, feeding a zombie his blood and ordering it to answer Rashida’s questions when he deemed it safe. These zombies were in good shape, but even the youngest of them had been dead for decades. Something in the death magic of his necromancy bound the dead back together making a zombie appear like the person they’d been when they were alive—even when all that remained was bones. Raylan wasn’t sure if he should be proud or profoundly concerned at how many old dead his necromancy had put back in such pristine shape.

Normally, he wouldn’t feed his blood to a zombie he’d raised outside a protective blood circle, but this night wasn’t anything near normal. Not for him. Not for any animator, he’d ever known. There hadn’t been any flesh left on these zombies’ bones for years, much less enough for undesirable entities to occupy. He’d seen shadows move behind the eyes of freshly dead zombies who’d not been raised with a protective circle. Dark things that he wouldn’t want around all these unassuming college kids. Civilians.

But just because they didn’t normally possess the long-dead didn’t mean Raylan wanted to press the
The last thing this night was, was normal. The sooner he put back what his power had pulled up, the better.

Rashida didn’t balk at the zombies, but she did at Raylan a few times when he cut off her questions when she’d gotten too chatty with a zombie he was ready to toss salt at so he could send it to rest. He thought he was being pretty gracious, moving back to let her record the exact location where they sank back into the ground before they moved on to the next one.

“This is great, we’ll know exactly where to excavate,” she said, an edge of excitement in her voice when they were switching zombies. “We might even be able to locate family.”

Apparently, the grave sites on three surrounding sides of Warfield had shared graves for at least three people buried between the late 1880s and the late 1980s judging by their clothing and their answers to Rashida’s questions.

Raylan had raised older zombies before. But he’d never raised this many at one time, and so many that were older. His necromancy had stretched out to raise a couple younger zombies as far as two or three burial sites away. The demographic was mixed—black and white, one was a former slave and another was a prominent Louisville businessman—or so he told them, offering them wealth to not return him to his grave when he realized he’d been brought back to life.

“We’ll check out his story later,” Rashida said. “All their stories.”

Raylan threw salt on the self-proclaimed business leader who’d died in 1925 and ordered him back to the grave, the same way Raylan had done with the former slave who’d died in the late 1880s and was buried almost underneath him.

Death dealt in equity—or maybe it had been during their lives when vampires and other preternatural entities were unknown. Raylan wondered again about what Malcolm said about Boyd’s church—what he was offering people. Malcolm would have him think Boyd was selling his parishioners eternal life in exchange for their souls.

Raylan saw it more plainly: Boyd just wanted power. Money and power. His mind tripped back to their shared vision—and he added Ava to Boyd’s wish list.

When a fistful of salt hit the final errant zombie a good while later, Raylan realized this night was the nightmare he’d always feared he’d have to face if he fully became a necromancer: that he would, or could, raise legions of dead. This was why his kind had historically been hunted and feared. He could force zombies to answer some anthropologist’s questions or he could command an army of the dead.

Tonight, the power didn’t care what he did with it as long as he did something with it. What that was remained up to Raylan to keep a tight rein on.

He stepped back into the protective circle to join Tim and Dallas.

Tim was leaning back against Warfield’s gravestone, and Raylan took his animator’s kit over and dropped it beside the stone marker. He shifted his shotgun to his far hand and reached out to grab Raylan’s arm.

“You doing all right? You look pale,” Tim said, his fingers wrapped around his wrist sliding up his forearm. “And you’re really cold.”

Raylan waved him off. “I’m fine. Starting to get tired, but I could put these three back with my eyes closed.”
“You needed Helen to help you put back the zombies from that mine… and there were as many here,” Tim pointed out. “You’re not going to pass out on me without putting these little darlings back to bed, are you?”

“Not tonight,” Raylan said. He pulled his arm through Tim’s hand so that he could mingle his fingers with Tim’s. Raylan squeezed his hand once soaking in… what felt like warmth, but felt more calming than that. Again, he felt balanced. “Huh.”

“What?” Tim asked.

“I uh…” Raylan was going to say he didn’t know, but he did know one thing. “You just feel good.”

Tim smile was sweet, brief, and closed-mouth. “Finish up so we can go home.”

“Finished up with your questions?” Raylan asked, moving toward Dallas.

“Thank you, yes,” she said, stepping back. “I just need to document which grids contain their graves.”

“Say, Dr. Dallas, which one turned out to be the oldest?” Raylan asked.

“Actually Mr. Henry Shook here,” Dallas said, waving at a young man with a dark natty suit and a thick beard. “Henry was a coachman for a mule-driven streetcar and died in 1883 when he misjudged the mule he was reshoeing.”

“Mule always had an ill temper,” Shook said.

Raylan nodded, thinking that maybe the former slave Rashida interviewed might have been dead longer. He finished the rest of the ritual to put the three zombies to rest, then moved back to wait with Tim while Dallas documented where they’d be digging for the zombies’ bones so they could move them before the bulldozers rolled in.

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Tim was looking through one video camera while Raylan scanned through the camera Dallas had been using.

“Are we really going to make me delete these if you’re in a single frame?” Tim asked. He was ready to go.

“If I don’t, then they’ll never believe either one of us.”

“Does that matter?”

A throat cleared behind them. “I take it tonight did not go as you planned,” Dallas said.

“I’d say not,” Raylan said.

“The cow was too much,” Tim said.

Dallas nodded as if she understood, but Tim thought maybe she knew there was something more at hand than too large a sacrifice.

“I have a proposal,” she said.

“What kind of proposal?” Tim asked, eyeing her.
“We could learn a great deal from what information we collected tonight,” she said. “If I promise you that we will digitally alter or delete any video frames and sections of audio with your voice or images on them, will you allow us to keep the footage?”

“You can’t use my name at all,” Raylan said. “The zombies outside the three we meant to raise…”

“We were in violation of HIPAA privacy rule,” she finished. “I understand we can’t use them in the study, but we will be able to move them and rebury them with proper grave markers now.”

Raylan shrugged.

“And no cell phone videos posted online. Anywhere,” Tim said. “I saw a few phones out over the course of the night.”

“I’ll take care of it,” she said, frowning. “Do you know who?”

Tim pointed out a couple kids to her.

“I’ll call your agent tomorrow for a quote for walking the graveyard, then I’ll go to the state and ask for more funding. I think they’ll be motivated if it means we can cut time off the excavation. I suggest you encourage her to give me a rather high starting price,” Dallas said.

Tim watched Raylan process this. Money didn’t seem to move Raylan, and he was curious to see his reaction.

“Say, Dr. Dallas, you wouldn’t happen to know what kind of paperwork someone would have to file to move a family member would you?” Raylan asked surprising Tim as he watched them hash out the legal forms involved.

Later, Raylan peeled off the Tyvek suit, then wadded it up, and shoved it into a bag to throw out when they got home. He slipped his shirt back on while Tim looked on. They were finally alone enough for Tim to ask about the extra zombies.

“What happened out there tonight? I thought you were only raising three zombies?” Tim asked.

“Not sure. I think I dropped my shields when I reached out to the dead and reached out to Boyd too,” Raylan answered. He packed his kit into the backseat of the truck.

“Wait a minute. You saw Boyd?”

“Connected with him, I think. Malcolm’s right. He’s blood-oathing his vampire church members,” Raylan said, slipping the holster of his Glock back onto his hip.

“But what went wrong? Why the mini zombie apocalypse?”

Raylan sighed. “I don’t know?”

“Are you asking me?”

“Maybe. It could have been the power kick from Boyd blood-oathing vampires. It could have been the size of the sacrifice. Can’t discount I had a backlog of power going into the night,” Raylan said. “Might have been all of that or…”

“Or what?” Tim asked.
Raylan thought, *Or my necromancy is going haywire.* “You ready to go?”

Tim looked surprised and nodded, then walked around to climb behind the wheel. Tim drove them past the area where they’d been working—his headlights spanned the gridded cemetery, the slain cow awaiting pickup, a few straggling students huddled with Dr. Dallas packing away equipment.

“Raylan, how long have you been an animator?” Tim asked.

“Licensed or…”

“Officially.”

“Since I was twenty-two—right out of college,” Raylan said. “Why?”

Tim shrugged. “I was just wondering if this animation thing you do ever actually goes to plan. Seems to go wrong more than it ever goes right.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for reading, commenting, kudo-ing and bookmarking, and most of all—for sticking with this. I am so sorry this chapter took so freaking long. I fell into a research hole, big-time.

My contact who answers questions about digs... like: ”What tools would you have on hand at a dig that you could collect a lot of blood in? You know, like a bucket.” To which, my source informed me, ”Well, a bucket.” Then, he explained sifting and screening and all that. Point being, my source was finishing his dissertation, which is not conducive to answering questions like, ”What would a bioarchaeologist ask a zombie?” So that part of the research added a week or so--then well, life.

I make no promises for when chapter five is coming. It will be coming eventually though.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you to Jonjo for beta-reading and helping me sand down all the rough patches. xooxox.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Raylan strolled into his boss’s office and dropped a form on the corner of his desk.

Art leaned back in his chair away from the form as if it were a coiled copperhead poised to strike. “What’s that?”

“What you asked for,” Raylan said, sitting down on the end of the couch closest to the door. It was the end of the day, the light outside Art’s window was turning more vivid, and Raylan could feel the dead gathering the power to awake. He glanced at the clock. Tim should be back soon from the morgue stakings he’d gone on to after dropping Raylan off at the courthouse. Too much longer and the dead he was striking down could rise. He tamped an irrational shot of concern back down with all the other emotions he liked to pretend he didn’t experience: Tim was a big boy who could handle hunting down master vampires; staking lifeless dead bodies who may or may not rise as vampires shouldn’t be a problem.

Raylan shuddered a little despite himself. “It’s my clearance to get back out in the field.”

“Ahh, I only asked for that weeks ago,” the chief said. Art picked up the form, addressing Raylan without raising his eyes. “Have a seat, why don’t ya?”

Raylan huffed a half-laugh and stretched his legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankles. He nudged a chair out of his way. “I will, thanks. When do you think I can get my car back?”

Art sat back in his chair again leveling his gaze on the deputy. “Why? You getting sick of Gutterson already?”

Raylan’s mouth thinned out, one corner lifting—a sardonic expression meant to deflect Art’s ribbing. “Ohhhh, I get it,” Art said, a teasing grin stretching across his face. “He’s getting sick of you.”

Raylan narrowed his eyes at him. “Is there somethin’ you’re fishin’ for here?”

The chief snorted. “Absolutely not,” he said, straightening in his chair behind his computer. “I’m just giving you shit.”

Raylan didn’t believe him. He pulled his hat off, fingerling the crease in the top before dropping it beside him on the couch to rest upside down in case Tim came back in before he put it back on. It hadn’t escaped Raylan’s notice that his partner was slowly training him, through a series of frowns and disapproving looks, in “the right way” a cowboy hat was supposed to rest when it wasn’t on his head.
“So you and Tim are pretty serious?”

Raylan snuck a peek at the open door but didn’t see any of the other deputies lurking closely enough to eavesdrop. “Are we having this conversation?”

“I think we are.”

Raylan sighed, wondering why now. “What do you want to know?”

“Have you always been… gay?” Art mouthed the word like it was foreign to his tongue.

“Bisexual,” Raylan said. “I was married to a woman, remember?” Raylan and Winona had been friendly with Art and his wife Leslie—friendly enough to do coupley things together.

“Is that what went wrong with you and Winona?” Art asked.

“Winona left me for Gary. You know that,” Raylan said, brow lowering a bit.

“She know you swing both ways?”

Raylan nodded. “No reason to hide it. Didn’t like it much. Fact is, what she couldn’t get used to was being married to a LEO. Didn’t help that the animation bothered her, too. The job, the hours, the danger, the creepiness.”

“And none of that’s a problem with Tim, is it,” Art said, nodding as if he understood the appeal. Maybe he did.

Raylan stopped and thought about it. He’d known that sameness between them was an advantage in dating Tim for a while now. Tim could hold his own, and he knew Raylan could as well, even though his partner fussed over him at times. Winona had fussed at Raylan in hopes that the necromancy, vampire killing, and probably the marshalling would all just go away eventually; Tim fussed so they could control it, stay alive, and keep on at… fighting or fucking side-by-side. The realization was too much like new taffy for Raylan to chew on publicly—to soft and sweet to share with anyone. The idea would need to harden and age for him to say it aloud to Tim, much less Art.

So, he said nothing in response to his chief.

“You see this thing with Tim going the distance?” Art asked, leaning back again and propping his feet on his desk.

Raylan shifted his hips back, pulled his legs out of their stretched-out position and propped his left ankle on his right knee. He traced the stitching on his boot with the pad of his forefinger.

“How’s the seizure on Bo’s assets going?” Raylan said.

“Good,” Art nodded. “Real well. Took possession of a dozen residential properties—a few tenants—mostly vampires—are paying the marshal service rent. Only problem we had outside of Boyd’s church was Ms. Crowder took exception to us seizing ownership of her home.”

“Ava Crowder? Wasn’t that the house where she and Bowman lived?” Raylan asked.

“They might have lived there, but Bo Crowder owned it,” Art said.

Raylan wondered if that was why he’d seen her with Boyd in his vision at the cemetery a few weeks back.
“Gotta say, those vampire businesses are booming. I can see why the town fathers got their panties in a bunch over the idea of losing the tourist traffic surrounding them. We’ll start the process for sending them to auction at the end of the year,” he said.

“Tim and I could go down and take a look around,” Raylan offered.

“Got your walking papers off desk duty and just can’t wait to get back down to Harlan, can you?” Art said, shaking his head.

Raylan’s mind briefly lighted on all the reasons he actually didn’t want to go…. Boyd was there. He didn’t want to be near him. He’d not been back to Harlan since he killed Bo, since he’d gone down to see if Helen was all right. He cringed. Over the past couple weeks, he’d raised more zombies than he had in years. No more roadkill had come knocking at midnight but his necromancy pulled on the reins like he was driving a wild horse that hated the harness and planned to bite through the bit at any moment. Raylan didn’t want to see Helen, but he needed to get down there sooner rather than later. He needed advice—even if asking for it from her would break something inside him.

“We never did get a line on Arlo, did we?” Raylan asked.

“There’s a BOLO out on him, but nothing’s popped,” Art said.

“He’s not that smart,” Raylan said. “I thought the locals would’ve come across him by now.”

“I don’t know how motivated they are to find him,” Art said.

“Been working with this prof in Louisville who’s been moving a graveyard,” Raylan said. “I had an idea on how we could flush Arlo out, but we’ll need a court order.”

“What for?” Art asked, eyes narrowing on Raylan.

“I want to get my mother disinterred and cremated.”

***

Raylan still didn’t have his own car back. Art promised they’d requisition his Town Car back from Ashland when he and Tim returned from Harlan. In the meantime, he was riding shotgun with Tim and Sheeba in his partner’s truck. It was likely that even if Raylan had his car back, he’d still be sitting in the passenger seat of Tim’s pickup.

Tim pulled up beside the house.

“You doing all right over there?” Tim asked.

Raylan shot him a look.

“That good then.” Tim got out and let Sheeba out of the back while Raylan sat there a few minutes. He positioned his hat on his head and joined Tim where he was waiting on the paved walkway. He nodded and Tim and Sheeba traced his steps up the walk.

She was waiting for him in the doorway.

“Raylan…,” his aunt breathed his name around the cigarette in the corner of her mouth.

He nodded, peering around her into the house. “Helen,” he said. “Arlo around?”

She laughed bitterly. “You know he’s not.”
“Do I?”

“Well, you should know he’s not. Not after how he treated you…”

Raylan held up a finger. “Stop. Stop right there. Don’t play like you didn’t have a part in Arlo’s bullshit,” he said.

“But Raylan, I’d never…”

“And yet you did,” he said, drawing in a deep breath through his nose. “Jam cake, Helen. You think I wouldn’t know your jam cake?” Raylan recalled the food Bo gave him when they’d held him overnight. The dessert was the same cake he’d grown up eating at his aunt Helen’s house.

Her lips thinned.

“You fry up the livers and gizzards too?” he’d been curious about that.

“I told Bo you hated them.”

Raylan heard Tim snort in disgust. While his partner covered Raylan’s back by scanning the surrounding area in case Arlo lay in wait, he was also apparently listening in.

Raylan set his jaw. “I’m not here for that,” he said, pulling open the screen door. He handed her a folded-up sheet of legal paper.

Her eyes narrowed, taking it and shifting her gaze to the paper she was unfolding to read. “What’s this?”

“It’s a warrant to exhume and cremate the remains of Frances McKinley Givens.”

“Huh.” Helen made a surprised noise.

Raylan folded his arms across his chest while she read. “Problem?”

Helen surprised him by laughing. “Arlo is going to be pissed. I told him again and again you can’t just bury a Grant…. They can come back as something ugly,” Helen paused. “But that’s what you’re trying to do, ain’t it? Piss off your father?”

Raylan half-smiled but didn’t reply. “Helen, I told you before she needed to be cremated. I’m not going to let her come back as a monster to be used in some kind of foul play. She was better than that.”

Helen nodded solemnly. “She was.”

Frances had been an animator in life, as many of the Grant line tended to be. When animators of any variety died, they were cremated. Animators, necromancers and voudun priests or priestesses never came back as anything positive. When someone tried to raise them—and it always seemed like someone did if their families didn’t take the precaution of cremation—they rose as flesh-eating zombies—with an insatiable craving for human flesh. Sometimes, if left alone long enough in unconsecrated ground, foul play wasn’t even necessary. They crawled out of their graves on their own as ghouls.

Raylan recalled the expression of horror that fell over Tim’s face as they talked this through, and how his partner seemed both disturbed and relieved by Raylan’s advance directive that his body would be cremated upon his death. The way his necromancy had been behaving, Raylan didn’t want
to think of what he’d come back as. As his power currently stood, he feared becoming a monster in life as much as he used to fear it happening in death.

Helen finally interrupted his line of thought.

“She wasn’t what you are though,” Helen said.

Raylan’s eyes narrowed and he could almost feel Tim’s attention shift away from the hills behind them and onto his aunt. Raylan shifted in response to Tim’s guard, his hands sliding to his hips, his body turning so he had Helen, Tim and the hills in his direct and peripheral vision.

“Raylan, there was a reason I sent you away—got you out of Harlan,” Helen said.

“I remember. So I didn’t become my father,” Raylan replied, bored. He’d been through this before with his aunt, with Winona, and even with Dan when he’d sent him back to Kentucky. “And if you didn’t notice the badge, I haven’t.”

Helen sighed. “That wasn’t all I was hoping you wouldn’t become,” she said.

“Helen?” Raylan asked.

“You need to see someone in the Grant line.”

“You're in the Grant line.”

“I don’t have the gift you have,” she said. “It’s… worse… since you been back to these hills and hollers, ain’t it?” Her voice grew stark. “And worse since Bo bound you.”

Raylan noticed her last comment wasn’t a statement. He’d known he would need to bring the topic up with Helen but he’d still held out a flicker of hope he could find answers without her. And, apparently she was granting that hope wings by wanting him to go ask someone else. But from the way she was talking she knew something about why his power was changing. She’d betrayed him to Arlo and Bo. He didn’t want to trust her again, and especially not with this.

“Helen what do you know about my power?” Raylan asked, his voice rough.

She shrugged. “Not nearly enough. Just that it’ll keep climbing ’til you give it what it wants.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Tim interrupted for the first time, finally out of patience.

Helen’s flinty gaze fell to Tim, sizing him up, then nodding before turning to Raylan. “Go to Grant's holler… Indian Line Road. Where my old house is,” she said. “And head on up into the hills. Find my cousin Mary, she’ll know how to help you.”

Tim and Raylan shared a look of confusion.

“I trust you’ll let Arlo know that we’ll be coming for Mama first thing in the morning?”

Helen shook her head. “Never said I been in touch with your daddy.”

“ Nope, you never did say,” Raylan agreed. He tipped his hat to her, and she gave him an indulgent smile that he turned his back on. An act that cost him only a wince at the small tinge of guilt gripping his heart.

***
Raylan and Tim didn’t, in fact, leave.

The plan was to find a place up in the hills overlooking the family plots where his mama was buried and wait Arlo out. Raylan expected him to try to move his mother before first light. The Kentucky State Police would be waiting a couple miles out to make the arrest.

As always, even when he did what Raylan expected, Arlo didn’t fail to disappoint. By half past midnight, Arlo was breaking ground on his next criminal offense: grave robbery.

Tim watched Arlo through his rifle scope.

“How far along to you want to let him get before we call in the staties?” Tim asked. They’d promised Art when he agreed to go along with this plan that they’d let the state police step in and handle the arrest. The waters were too muddy for Raylan to arrest his own father, or for Tim to even arrest his lover’s parent. If the crimes Arlo was guilty of fell under preternatural criminal law, they might have been able to take him down. But Arlo was human with a right to a human trial, which meant both Raylan and Tim were relegated to dropping the bait and sitting on the sidelines.

Raylan sighed. “How nervous does he look?”

“Not that.”

“Hmmm, how many laws has he broken so far?”

Tim pulled out his notebook from the side pocket in his BDUs. “We got the felony—violating graves—with the first shovel-full of dirt. Class D felony there. One to five years on top of the twenty for kidnapping you,” Tim said. His voice grew softer. “I think he actually needs to reach her to get to abuse of a corpse, though. Do you really want to let it get that far?”

Raylan answered him by hitting the dial button on the number under Trooper Tom Bergen’s contact in his cell phone. Shortly thereafter, they watched as the troopers moved in on Arlo, cuffed him, and led him away.

***

A couple hours before sunrise Sheeba’s growling and baying woke Raylan and Tim and brought them creeping quietly down the stairs to join her on the first floor of a house forfeited from Bo Crowder’s estate.

Raylan put a hand on Tim’s shoulder as the other marshal cleared the stairwell.

“It’s Boyd,” Raylan said. He dropped all pretense of stealth and padded over to the door, flipping one of the locks. Art had warned them that the forfeited house they’d be staying in was cold at night —the marshal service didn’t want to pay to fill the propane tank for the furnace or stove. They both were sleeping in the closest thing they had to pajamas: T-shirts and Tim’s sweats. The pants were loose around Raylan’s waist and hit him above the ankle.

“What are you doing?” Tim said.

“Opening the door to find what the hell he wants,” Raylan said, flipping the other lock. “It’s not like he can come in uninvited.”

Tim commanded Sheeba to heel about the same time an angry female voice retorted, “But I can.”

The door pushed open and Ava Crowder had a foot in the door.
“Raylan Givens, do you actually have the sheer gall to sleep in my bed?” Ava demanded.

Raylan’s eyes traveled from her to Tim and then out to the vampire waiting patiently at the bottom of the porch steps. Ava began to advance on Raylan.

“Ms. Crowder, I wouldn’t do that,” Tim said, his dog’s quiet growl rumbling at his side. “Sheeba’s job is to attack anyone or anything that threatens Raylan or myself.”

“Ava,” Boyd cautioned. “Step on back down here with me, would you?”

Ava seemed to come out of her anger a bit, her eyes falling to the dog at Tim’s side then over to Boyd.

Tim repeated the command for Sheeba to heel, and Ava stepped back away from Raylan.

“You stole my house, my home—right out from under me,” Ava said, then slapped him. “I thought you were the good guys.”

Tim dug his hand into Sheeba’s K-9 unit harness following up with another harsh command.

“Ava honey, come on back down here,” Boyd said, holding out his hand.

When she stepped back far enough for Boyd to grab her arm, he pulled her down the steps to him and under his arm, putting himself between her and Raylan and Tim.

Raylan stepped out to the front porch. Tim followed along, his hand still tight on Sheeba’s harness.

“Boyd.”

“Raylan.”

“This go about how you expect?” Raylan asked.

“About,” Boyd said, his grin showing a bit of fang.

“What were you thinkin’ bringin’ her here?”

“We were just being neighborly, Raylan,” Boyd said. “What brings you to Harlan after such a long absence?”

“Which absence?” Tim asked.

Boyd’s attention shifted to Tim for a moment, his eyes tightening on the younger marshal. “Tim, is it?”

“Deputy Gutterson,” Tim replied.

“Well, I know Raylan’s real fond of you,” Boyd said suggestively. Ava rolled her eyes and mumbled something between “Geez” and “Fags.”

“Raylan?” Tim said.

Raylan shook his head.

“Family business. I’m here to put my mama to rest the right way, Boyd,” Raylan said. “Now, what do you want?”
The vampire nodded. “Can’t I visit my human servant when he finally sees fit to come around?”

Ava drew a sharp breath. “Boyd?” she said, hurt. “He’s your human servant?”

“I…” Boyd looked confused. “Ava… I thought you knew.”

“I thought you’d make me…” Ava stopped and inhaled. Her eyes traveled through the group of them, and she shook her head. “I see. This is gonna be just like it was in high school, ain’t it?”

“And how was that?” Tim asked.

Ava shot him a defiant look. “Back then? I liked him…” she pointed to herself and then Raylan. “But he was too busy liking him,” she said, pointing to Boyd.

“Well darlin’, he didn’t always like me and I spent a good few years likin’ you,” Boyd told Ava.

Raylan rolled his eyes. “What do you want, Boyd?”

“You going to be around a spell Raylan? Might be a good idea to have a few words about how we want to go forward,” Boyd said.

Neither Ava nor Tim looked very happy at Boyd’s words. “Not gonna be much ‘goin’ forward,’ Boyd. And unless you want our significant others to kill us in our sleep, maybe you should get around to a point.”

“Aw honey, I wouldn’t kill you,” Tim said to Raylan, then he turned and smiled at Boyd.

“All right, Deputy. I hear you.” Boyd held up his hands. “I just picked up on Raylan’s… uneasiness about bringing on some of my parishioners and thought we could talk about it like gentlemen before he went all Executioner, or you went all Death, on the wrong vampire.”

“Parishioners my ass. You’re blood-oathing vampires and collecting power,” Raylan said.

“Why Raylan, you’re misguided as always,” Boyd said. “I’m saving souls… souls of the undead and dead alike.”

Tim’s eyes traveled over to meet Raylan’s, Malcolm’s words hanging remembered between them.

“You know Boyd, I had a word with Malcolm—the vampire of that church in Missouri you modeled yours after?”

“Why Raylan, are you keeping tabs on me?”

“Always,” Raylan said, pausing. “That vampire, a creature who loves God, hundreds of years older than you… that vampire doesn’t buy for a second vampires are anything but damned. Malcolm was sure enough you couldn’t save a vampire’s soul—that all you’re doing is collecting a powerbase.”

“And that, my friend, is why his church is falling and mine is rising, rising high.” Boyd’s voice took on the timbre of the devout.

Raylan turned away for the door.

“Raylan?”

“If you’re gonna preach, I’m going in and Tim can shoot you.”
Tim half-laughed, but Boyd guffawed.

“That boy won’t risk losing you in order to kill me.”

Raylan turned back, now standing half in and out of the front screen door. “You just keep right on thinkin’ that, Boyd,” Raylan said. “Keep preaching if you want, savin’ souls if that’s what you want to call it, but the hot minute I find out you’re doing something illegal, this ‘boy’ and I will be in a court of law asking for an execution writ on you.”

Boyd’s manner grew still as only the undead can—similar to a snake prepared to strike.

“Tim might not want to risk killin’ you, but seems you forgot I killed your daddy knowin’ exactly what it’d do to me.”

After Raylan said everything he intended to say to Boyd, he padded into the Ava’s former kitchen in his sock feet to start coffee with Sheeba on his heels. He heard Tim lock the front door and hit the stairs. He dug around in a box of provisions that Tim’d left on the table.

He pulled a plastic container of Folgers from the box—Tim had frowned at the brand. Turned out, his partner was a coffee snob. Raylan didn’t mind it though. He’d been brought up on worse and for the last twenty years had been drinking coffee in marshal’s offices; nothing was more bitter than burnt cop-house coffee. Raylan just figured that Tim hadn’t been a cop long enough to appreciate bad coffee, or how bad, bad coffee could get.

Raylan fished around in the cabinets until he came up with a cup. He pulled the pot off the burner and held his cup under the stream of dripping coffee.

“I hate it when you do that,” Tim said, appearing in the hall wearing a pair of his old Army nylon wind pants and a long-sleeved cotton T-shirt.

“It’s not like you’re going to drink it,” Raylan said, turning to Tim to watch him track over to the fridge to grab a bottle of water. The weather was turning cooler—and it was coldest in the hours before sunrise when Tim ran. Raylan missed seeing Tim come back from his morning run all sweaty in his PT Ranger shorts, but didn’t completely hate Tim’s old IPFU wind pants. They clung to him better than some of Tim’s work pants. “You hate this brand.”

“Still,” Tim said. He drained half of the water and left the bottle on the table as he made his way over to Raylan. “It throws the rest of the pot off when you take the first cup out of the mix. Is Boyd gone or at least out of earshot?”

Raylan looked surprised, but didn’t sense the master vampire in their proximity any longer. “Nowhere near here,” he said.

“For the record,” Tim said, his voice flinty with cold anger, “if I have to hold off on turning, you damned well better not shoot Boyd Crowder before we find a better way to untangle the two of you.”

Raylan was drawn up short; it was the first time Tim had brought up the subject of him turning into a vampire since they got back from New Mexico. He and Tim stood there in the silent kitchen staring each other down—Raylan’s eyes weary and Tim’s wide. The tension between them enough to rouse a concerned whine out of Sheeba.

Raylan sighed. “Fair point. All right.”
“Thank you.” Tim visibly relaxed and took another long draw on his water, then closed the space between them.

“You sure it’s a good idea to run this morning? It’s still dark out,” Raylan said, eyeing the darkened window. “Sunrise isn’t until almost eight.”

“Sheeba will be with me,” Tim said. “Besides, if I skip, she’ll be stir crazy by noon. You feel anything out there that shouldn’t be?”

Raylan cocked his head and let his power open up. “Well, Boyd’s long gone.”

“What the hell was that about… him showing up here?”

“Who knows. Maybe Ava was just pissed the marshal service seized the house with Bo’s other properties,” Raylan said. He was still trying to sense if any vampires were anywhere near the property. “Best guess? He sensed me in Harlan and curiosity got the better of him. I don’t feel anything dead close to the house, but the local vamps have another hour of full dark.”

“We’ll stick close to the perimeter of the house,” Tim said. He crowded in closer to Raylan, who bent to kiss him, touching their lips once, then shifting to deepen the kiss. Tim had taken the time to brush his teeth.

Tim patted Raylan’s stomach twice, indicating he was finished with necking for the moment and pulled away. “That brand of coffee really is terrible,” Tim said, licking his lips.

Raylan’s eyes widened into an “I told you so” gesture. “You do have a weapon on you, right?” Raylan asked. He could tell there wasn’t a concealed weapon on Tim from the waist down but his partner hid weapons like some people worked to master the Sunday New York Times Crossword puzzle.

“Other than my dog?”

Raylan rolled his eyes.

Tim sighed and lifted his shirt to flash Raylan a black belly band holster holding his Glock.

“Hot,” Raylan quipped, not entirely insincere in his assessment.

Tim popped his eyebrows up and down once in reply, then flashed Raylan a quick grin before leaving with his dog.

“We have to leave by twenty ’til eight to meet the gravediggers,” Raylan called after him.

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

Then, he slammed the door after him.

***

“You’re serious about this,” Helen said, when they turned up in her yard a couple hours later. “Good to know your daddy won’t have to go to prison ’cause you tricked him into robbing your mama’s grave.”

Tim coughed at her statement and Raylan elbowed him.
“I think the kidnapping charges outweigh the year or two he’ll get from turning over a few spades of grave dirt,” Raylan told her.

She’d come out of the house when the funeral director from Licklighter and Sons Funeral Home and Crematory pulled up to the house followed by flatbed tow-truck hauling a backhoe.

Emmitt Licklighter, however, didn’t think as little of Arlo’s handiwork. Raylan wasn’t sure if he was the original Licklighter or one of the sons.

“What’s this?” the funeral director said unhappily, waving to the overturned grass and dirt.

Tim and Raylan tried several arguments to explain Arlo’s tampering, including flashing their badges.

After Raylan confirmed he was Frances Givens’ next of kin as her closest blood relative, authorized and willing to pay for the exhumation and cremation, the funeral director still wouldn’t start work until the state police confirmed Raylan’s story about his father’s arrest the night before. Raylan called Tom Bergen, who told him it’d be at least an hour before he could be on site.

And so, they waited. Licklighter had followed Helen into the house after a promise of coffee.

Tim figured the coffee was safe since Helen was serving to the funeral director too and took two mugs of black coffee out for him and Raylan. They sat on the side of an old claw-footed bathtub filled with flowers wilted and dying from the first frost a week or so back.

“Tastes like your coffee,” Tim said, wincing after a sip from his mug. “How is that a genetically passed-on trait?”

“Learned trait,” Raylan reasoned.

“Huh,” Tim muttered. The gravediggers had the backhoe off the tow truck and were waiting in their cab. “Are you paying for them by the hour to cool their jets until Bergen gets here?” Tim asked.

“Not by the hour,” Raylan said. “But paying all the same.”

“There aren’t any other staties in this part of the county who could get here sooner?”

“Bergen didn’t volunteer that. Guess he figured it was easier to get the arresting trooper out to the scene. I suppose that we’re actually going to move her less than twelve hours after Arlo tried could come up later and bite him in the ass,” Raylan said.

Tim shrugged, but Raylan picked up that his expression portrayed he didn’t completely buy into that reasoning.

“You know, Bergen’s married, I think,” Raylan said. “Kids, too.”

Tim shot him a hard look. “You suggestin’ I’m jealous of your bromance?”

“I am, actually,” Raylan said, sliding his hand across Tim’s back. He leaned into Tim’s space and whispered in his ear. “I can smell it right here.” Raylan pressed his nose against the little patch of exposed bare skin behind Tim’s ear and inhaled.

“Smelling my emotions is really an unfair advantage,” Tim said, turning his head a degree toward Raylan, putting space between Raylan’s nose and his skin.

“I know.”
“Not that that’s gonna stop you from doing it again, will it?”

“Can’t say I plan to stop, no,” Raylan said. Then, he shifted his head and kissed Tim properly.

When Raylan pulled back, not wanting to get too hot and heavy in public, Tim huffed. “You suck,” he said, still flirting.

Raylan opened his mouth to reply but the words stuck in his throat. Fact was, Raylan didn’t suck and hadn’t since the night Bo forced himself on him in order to get Raylan to bite him deeply enough to draw blood. While the act wasn’t sexually motivated, it cast a long shadow across Raylan’s psyche. Tim must have been caught up in the moment, because he’d never pressed Raylan about it. He’d rolled with whatever Raylan wanted to do in bed, letting Raylan either lead or he’d lead himself when Raylan deferred control to him.

Still, Raylan felt conflicted. At first he’d been turned-off at the idea of giving oral sex at all, then he felt guilty for feeling that way because he wanted Tim. Deep down, no question whatsoever about that. Now, he feared trying it again because he didn’t want to associate his feelings for Tim with the revulsion he felt for Bo.

His dissonance must have been apparent because understanding dawned on Tim’s face. “Ray… I’m… I didn’t mean to bring that up. I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Raylan said pulling away.

“You know I’m okay with us, right?” Tim asked. “If you never went down on me again, it wouldn’t change anything.”

“I do appreciate that,” Raylan said. “You’ve been…” He tried to think of a word that was enough for Tim, but fell short. “… Really patient.”

Tim squinted his eyes at Raylan. “We all right?”

Raylan dropped his hand to Tim’s leg, grasping his thigh above his knee for a quick squeeze followed with a pat and a slow nod of his head for an answer.

Not long after, Bergen showed up and spoke with the funeral director, showing him a copy of the arrest report on his tablet for one Arlo Givens including felony charges for desecrating his dead wife’s grave.

The funeral director chased the LEO bystanders, including Sheeba, back away from the grave. After the mini backhoe did its job, Licklighter climbed a stepladder down into the grave, wearing a full PPE suit.

“Jesus, did your mother die from Anthrax poisoning or something?” Bergen asked, seemingly shocked by the director’s personal protection equipment.

Tim tried not to laugh at the question.

“Breast cancer,” Raylan said, schooling his own expression. His mama’s cause of death shouldn’t be a laughing matter. If nothing else, she’d brought him up with more respect than that.

“Sorry—the outfit just seems like overkill, don’t you think?” the trooper said.

“Definitely,” Tim said. “Especially when you’ve seen Raylan raise zombies wearing his cowboy hat and jeans. Wait a minute, should you be wearing a suit like that when you bring up the dead?” Tim
Raylan half-laughed. “No. I think the ritual magic…” Raylan waved his hand a bit looking for the right words. “It neutralizes whatever it is that guy thinks he’s going to run into pulling her bones out of the ground.”

Tim seemed relieved by the way he relaxed the rigid set of his shoulders, until he set them back again. “You’re bullshitting me, aren’t you?” Tim said.

“Pretty much.” Raylan hid a smile.

After that they thanked Tom, Raylan and the trooper sharing a vigorous handshake with three brisk pumps while Tim watched. Raylan thought his partner smelled more amused than jealous at the gesture. Tim nodded good-bye to Tom who got back into his patrol car and moved on with his day.

“Maybe it’s a bond over the height of your hats,” Tim said after Tom left, closing one eye and holding up his hand to sight-measure the height of Raylan’s cowboy hat between his forefinger and his thumb, earning him yet another eye roll from Raylan.

“You’re bullshitting me, aren’t you? I’m crushing your head.” He shifted his hand down a bit and let his finger come down on his thumb.

“What’re talking about?” Raylan said.

“Don’t need to bother with an inoculation. The mountains and the poverty pretty much took care of it. And for the record, I prefer non-ephemeralist.” Raylan almost smiled.

“Big ten-dollar word there, cowboy,” Tim replied, working his lips to contain his smile and keep his stoicism in place.

“Paragon would do, if the other’s too much of a word for ya.”

Raylan crossed his arms and twisted his torso side-to-side once or twice and Tim smiled. Raylan only rocked sideways like that, with his hand so far away from his gun, when he felt safe. Tim was pretty sure his partner didn’t know he only did it when he was amused and in the company of someone he trusted enough to cover his six.

Raylan expected to have more of an emotional response to disinterring his mother.

Logically, he knew all that was left of his mama after sixteen years in the ground was likely bones. From what Helen and the mortuary company could tell him, Frances hadn’t been embalmed—primarily due to the fact that Arlo was a cheapskate, unwilling to pay the extra grand to preserve her like most Westerners. For once, Raylan was thankful for his father’s tight nature. He didn’t cotton to the idea of embalming fluid leaching into the ground around the house or running off into other parts of the land that might be used as farmland again one day.

No Givens would ever farm that land again, but another family might.

Raylan also thought that his work as an animator had changed his expectations of the dead. Even though he knew the dead he raised were often decayed corpses before he reanimated them and after he sent them back to rest, but what he always saw crawl out of the ground were whole ready for Raylan to temporarily return their consciousness to them. He was used to seeing the dead as reanimated zombies or vampires, so when they uncovered his mama’s rotted wood coffin containing
only her skeletal remains, Raylan couldn’t make the jump between the bones and the woman who brought him up.

He also considered that maybe his lack of emotional reaction when they began to uncover her body was because he’d been long gone when they put her to rest. Usually that brought up a streak of guilt. That morning, he felt nothing.

“You all right?” Tim asked quietly.

“Sure. It’s… I’ve raised worse?” Raylan shrugged.

“Are you asking or telling me?”

Raylan raised a shoulder to Tim, unsure himself what his answer would be.

“We need to follow her remains to the mortuary. I need to see her cremation through,” Raylan said.

“Why?”

“Like a powerful vampire, I’m going to scatter her ashes in a couple different rivers. I don’t think she was a necromancer, but she was a better animator than Helen. Stronger. If someone raised her, she’d be nothing but a flesh-eating zombie,” Raylan said. “That, I couldn’t stand.”

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The smell of the crematory had gotten to Raylan, the gritty feel of the people dust in the building bothered Sheeba, and Licklighter didn’t want Sheeba to wait inside the funeral home itself. So Tim had dragged them all out back behind the building to wait. They’d been at the crematory for almost two hours when Bergen called Raylan’s cell phone.

“Givens.”

“Raylan? You and your partner still in town?”

“We’re at the funeral home. Should be done soon. Why?”

“Ah, sorry to bother you. It’s just that we got a victim here in Harlan… looks like cause of death might be a vampire bite… but the placement is kind of questionable. You think you and Tim could spare some time to swing by and give us your take? Would save us calling a preternatural marshal out of Nashville.”

“Oh, no, don’t do that. If it’s going to be too much longer, I’ll send Tim and Sheeba over and catch up later. Got an address for me?” Raylan asked. He waved at Tim who wrote the address Raylan repeated back to Tom down in his notebook.

“Where’s the bite?” Raylan asked.

“Inner thigh,” Bergen replied.

“We’ll be there as soon as we can.” Raylan hung up.

“What’s up?” Tim asked.

“Bergen thinks he’s got a victim with a vampire bite on the inner thigh.”
“Guess we’re not clearing out of Harlan tonight then,” Tim said.

“Doesn’t look like it. Be right back. Going to go see how much longer they’re going to be.”

Raylan pushed a crematory attendant named Paris with spiky blond hair and a daunting brow piercing into giving him a hood to wear so he could follow him in to check on his mother’s remains.

Even before the guy opened the door, the heat seemed unbearable. Raylan peeked in through the open door. He could still see the shape of a skull glowing red but most of the bones were broken bits. He was concerned about the skull. He wouldn’t be able to leave such a prominent body part intact and not worry that someone could try to bring her back. Paris shoved a long pole into the space, raking through her remains. When he bumped the skull, it collapsed in on itself, no longer a concern.

Raylan nodded at the attendant and Paris turned off the furnace, then began to rake her ashes to the front where they fell through to a metal trough below.

He pointed to the door where Raylan went to wait for Paris to join him carrying a metal box of the burnt and broken bones of his mother.

Outside what Raylan called the furnace room, Paris poured her bones and ash onto a metal tray and began sifting through her remains.

“What are you looking for?” Raylan asked.

“Metal. Like hip or knee replacements. That kind of thing. You know if she had anything like that?” Paris asked.

Raylan started to answer but then stopped, feeling shame. He actually didn’t know. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

The guy was nonplussed. “No problem. I have to look anyway. Boss’ll kill me if I dropped a metal hip-joint in his bone blender.”

“His what?”

Paris’ eyes went big for a moment. “Erm… I mean the cremulator. It’s not really a blender. Please don’t tell Mr. Licklighter I called it that,” he said. “The cremulator grinds down the bones to ash. Huh, what’s this?”

“What is that?”

“Your mom break her arm or something?”

Raylan’s face shut down. Arlo hadn’t usually gotten violent enough to break bones, but the scenario wasn’t outside the realm of possibility.

“I expect so,” Raylan said.


“What do you mean by ‘little bones’?”

“Well, not big weight-supporting bones like femur or tibia in your leg—or the humerus from the upper arm. The plates’re too small,” Paris said. “Suited more for a lower arm bone like the ulna… or maybe even a clavicle?”
“How do you know all this?” Raylan asked.

“I love my work?” Paris said. “You dig enough medical equipment out of bone and ash piles, the curiosity gets the better of you. I googled one and was hooked.”

Paris held out the plates to Raylan, who took them both, turning one over a couple times. It wasn’t more than a couple inches long, but was black and dull where the metal had burned dark in the fires of the crematory.

“Had to be a bad break to put one of those in,” Paris said. “You can keep those if you want.”

Raylan nodded, then slipped the pieces of metal into the pocket of his jeans.

“Just a few more minutes in the cremulator and you can be on your way. Not a lot of ash to pick through since she was mostly bone to start with,” Paris said, then stopped as if realizing who he was talking to. “It’s just that we don’t usually get witness cremations back here. Sorry.”

Raylan shrugged. “I’m a licensed animator. Dead doesn’t make me squeamish.”

Paris was good to his word. He dumped the powder into plastic bag and closed it with a twist tie.

“You all set?” Tim asked when he saw Raylan coming toward the truck.

Raylan showed Tim the bag of ashes and it shocked him.

“No urn?”

Raylan shrugged. “We’re just going to spread them over water.”

They climbed into Tim’s truck. He’d fed Sheeba and then let her jump into the backseat to take a nap while they waited. The weather was cool enough for her to sleep in the truck. She’d been up and down the five hours he and Raylan slept the night before, hypervigilant with her marshals sleeping in a non-home space.

“This day’s already been rough,” Tim said. It really hadn’t been rough, but Tim thought it should have been. Raylan’s aloof composure wasn’t atypical, but Tim felt like he was waiting for either an echo or an avalanche after hollering “hello” into a canyon. Digging up a parent warranted some emotional response. “You sure you’re all right?” Tim asked.

“Don’t know.”

“Really?” Tim was genuinely surprised that his partner didn’t just brush his concern off.

Raylan dug around in his jeans pocket and then handed him a small bracket or brace that was more holes than metal. What metal there was looked black and dull.

“What’s this?” Tim said, turning it over.

“Paris gave it to me.”

“Paris is a weird dude.” Tim handed it back to Raylan.

“Work with the dead long enough…” Raylan’s voice was quiet. Tim thought something was off.

“You trying to tell me you’re going to get weirder?” Tim pushed with humor, hoping he could nudge Raylan around.
“Probably. That a problem?” Raylan asked in a tone that indicated it really could be.

“Nope.”

Tim started the truck and barely heard Raylan’s answer to his previous question.

“It’s a bone plate. He found two in my mama’s ashes.”

“Arlo?”

Raylan winced. “How did you…”

“Jesus Raylan. I met the man when he swung a bat at me,” Tim said. The night they came out to see Helen about some zombies, Arlo met them with a baseball bat trying to take them down. Tim incapacitated him enough the older man ended up the hospital.

“I know it,” Raylan said.

“She break anything when you lived at home?” Tim asked, unsure where to go with this new information. He knew Arlo had abused his family including Raylan and his former wife, but he didn’t know the full extent of it.

“Always had more than our fair share of bruises. Don’t remember any surgeries though. That’d draw attention,” Raylan said. He took off his hat and ran his hand through his hair before placing it back on his head with the brim just a bit lower to hide his eyes. “You gotta break a bone completely through to need one of these. She had two that he found.”

“But you don’t remember any breaks?” Tim said. He wasn’t sure how far to push the topic. But as long as his partner was still talking, he would ask the questions.

“You trying to say something?” Raylan’s chin came up.

Tim was stunned for a moment by the stubborn reaction. “No… I wasn’t implying anything. Maybe your aunt could tell you?”

“Don’t know that’d make it any better.”

Tim didn’t know which would make it worse: knowing what had caused the injuries to begin with or having to ask Helen for the information.

“I still wasn’t there.”

“You don’t really think you could have stopped him? Or made her leave?” Tim suggested.

Raylan sighed.

Tim let Raylan drag the silence out for a few minutes before changing the subject. “Where we going?”

Raylan told him which road to take to head toward Bergen’s crime scene.

A few minutes later, Raylan sighed. “It’s just as well.”

“Wait a minute,” Tim said, turning onto the road out of the funeral home. “What’s just was well?”

“That it’s you.”
“That what’s me?” Tim shot a quick glance at Raylan. He wanted to watch his face to gauge his reaction.

“Always thought if I got married again, it’d be a to woman, and all that goes along with that kind of marriage.”

“What kind of marriage is that?” Tim asked.

“You know... a straight one.”

“And when you say all that goes along with it?” Tim’s brow furrowed in confusion as he tried to figure out what Raylan was getting at by that “kind” of marriage.

“Kids,” Raylan said. “It’s just as well.”

“Why? Because you think you’d beat your kids?” Tim asked, a bit incredulous.

“Hell no.”

“But you think it’s a good thing you can’t get me pregnant in case you did?”

“Shit no… I just…”

Tim thought he should be angry at Raylan’s logic, but didn’t really feel that way. He couldn’t let Raylan slide by after pitching the idea that being with Tim was somehow safer because he was a man rather than a woman. “You’re a dick.”

“Yeah. You knew that going in.”

“And you don’t want kids.” Tim wasn’t really sure but guessed that was true.

“Didn’t say that.”

That surprised Tim. “You’re afraid of having kids?”

Raylan didn’t answer him.

“No answer,” Tim said. “Bingo.”

Raylan scowled at him from under the brim of his hat.

“And who said we were gonna get married?” Tim said, trying to lighten the mood.

Raylan turned away from Tim to look out the window.

“And that makes double bingo,” Tim muttered.

“What’s that?” Raylan asked, clearly irritated.

“Nothing much,” Tim said, “Just that all you have to do is ask and I’ll have your babies.”

Raylan snorted. “Then, to your question from a couple weeks ago, no, I don’t think we should get tested and try bareback.”
Chapter End Notes

Yo, MrsRidecully, clear skies here at posting on this one. Knock on wood, but it feels like curse-breaking time in my half of the world. Cross your fingers!

Thanks for everyone for reading and for leaving kudos and comments. I appreciate y'all hanging in with the fic and all the feedback.

FYI -- I made a video a couple weeks ago... it's under this pseud on AO3 and also on Youtube. I know some of this fic's regular readers saw it, but it's not in this series so heads up if you don't follow me. (It is better on Youtube... easier to see.)
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

As usual, a thank-you out to Jonjo for beta-reading and making sure all the weird Anita-land worldbuilding translates into this version of Justified.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim pulled off Route 72 where a group of emergency vehicles were gathered.

“Where are we?”

“Old 119 Bridge. Closed in the ’90s, I think,” Raylan said.

Trooper Tom Bergen stepped over the steel guardrail blocking the end of the bridge with an accompanying sign that read “Road Closed.” The trooper was heading in their direction.

The day had warmed up burning away the chill leftover from the morning. Tim eyed the sun but couldn’t tell the time. As a sniper, he was usually in tune with his surroundings. He just wasn’t used to the path the sun was supposed to cut along the Kentucky sky in late October, so he peeked at his watch: almost noon.

The bridge was a nightmare—rusted iron trusses with a wood base, covered in brown dead and dying vines.

“Did someone spray or did that plant life die on its own?” Tim nodded to the growth that covered the bridge and the bank as far as he could see. The ground cover was still a vibrant green.

“The plant’s called kudzu. The stuff on the bridge probably went with the first frost. The rest’ll go by winter. It’s the only thing that’ll beat it back,” Raylan said, then he greeted their trooper friend. Colleague? Jealousy aside, Tim wasn’t sure where Tom Bergen fell with Raylan on the scale between colleague and friend.

“Hey Tom, long time no see,” Raylan asked, smiling.

“Sorry to pull you out again, but it’s damned handy you both were still around. We got a body below. The coroner’s initial finding is death due to blood loss from a bite on her inner thigh,” Tom said.

“Where’s the body?” Tim asked, looking around. All he could see was green.

“Easiest if we just go out on the Baxter Bridge and look down,” Bergen said, turning back the way he came.

“Thought you said this was the Old 119,” Tim said, then made a short clicking sound with his tongue to encourage Sheeba to follow him.

“No one from Harlan calls it the Baxter,” Raylan said, managing to sound like he was talking about a high society inner circle.
They trailed Bergen across the bridge. The trooper stopped just past half-way across the bridge and waited for them to catch up. The bank on the other side of this fork of the Cumberland River ran nearly half the span of the old bridge. Tim looked over the side to where a body lay half in the water and half on a rocky bank. The eight-foot cliff above where the bank met the mossy-colored water was covered in kudzu, aside from a path where the emergency personnel had been crawling up and down to get to her.

“We haven’t moved the body. We didn’t know if you two wanted to go down there,” Bergen said.

“All—” Tim started.

“No—” Raylan interrupted.

“Right?” Tim finished, shooting Raylan a questioning look.

“No way,” Raylan reiterated. “Snakes.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “We’ll follow the path the forensic techs and the coroner took. They’ll have chased all the bad snakes away,” Tim said. “Besides, I need to know if Sheeba can pick up a scent.”

Raylan squinted his eyes, his expression dubious.

“And she can scent snakes too,” Tim added.

“Really?” Raylan asked.

Tim turned to Bergen. “Just point the way.” He followed Bergen, but stopped when Raylan didn’t follow.

“You’re really not coming?” Tim said.

“I’d just be in the way,” Raylan said, “Don’t get bit.”

Tim let his head fall back for a moment and then turned to follow Bergen down the bridge over what looked like someone’s backyard. Bergen stepped over the guardrail at the other end of the bridge, while Tim took a solid jab to the balls clearing the height, mumbling “Fuck me,” under his breath.

“What’s that?” Bergen said.

“Nothing. Just cussing my short legs,” Tim said. Sheeba vaulted over the rail as if it had been part of one of the training courses back at the ranch.

“What kind of K-9 is that? I don’t think I’ve ever seen a service dog so big,” Bergen said.

“Some German shepherd, but mostly Troll hound,” he answered. “They’re the only kind of canine that will track preternatural beings. Dogs get spooked and won’t follow the scent.”

“She’s beautiful,” Bergen said.

Tim smiled, showing all his teeth. “She really is,” he said. “Been with me a while now.”

At the side of the cliff overlooking the river, Tim gauged how he would get down. They’d secured a rope to rappel down and climb back up. Still, the rock edge of the bank was small. He didn’t think he was going to get out of this dry. Sheeba definitely wouldn’t, and he didn’t like the look of the murky green water. He suddenly thought that maybe Raylan’s snake excuse was bullshit. His eyes raised to his partner up the bridge, standing with arms crossed and his hat shielding him from the sun. He
could feel Raylan’s eyes on him, so Tim tipped his head to him. He felt a rush of satisfaction when
the other marshal’s hand raised in a short wave.

Tim chewed on a smile and rappelled down to the bank. When his feet found the rocks below, he
moved to the side and called Sheeba to him.

She jumped down gracefully, but landed less so—hitting the opaque water and splashing it over both
of them. Tim winced trying not to think of what made this fork of the Cumberland that particular
shade of milky asparagus and hoped that Ava’s old tub was big enough to accommodate a grumpy
Troll hound, even though he was pretty sure he didn’t have her shampoo with him this trip. His eyes
caught Raylan on the bridge again, and narrowed on his partner’s chest moving like he was
laughing. Tim shook his head and decided he was definitely using Raylan’s shampoo on the dog—
that bottle of expensive stuff Raylan liked, that tried so hard to effortlessly smell like a *Maxim*
magazine ad. His dog would hate it, probably more than Raylan. When she splashed him again, Tim
didn’t even feel particularly bad about that either.

Tim picked his way over to the body—a pale young woman with what he guessed was blonde hair.
He had no idea of the length, since what wasn’t matted to her head was floating in the murky water.

He nodded to the coroner who was still with the body. “Deputy US Marshal Tim Gutterson with the
preternatural branch out of Lexington. This is my K-9… she should be able to pick up something off
the body. So, when you are ready, I’d like to have her try to pick up a scent,” Tim said. “What do
you have?”

The coroner nodded and waved but didn’t offer one of his gloved-up hands. “Dr. Goodacher,
coroner for the Harlan County Coroner’s office.”

Tim understood the situational politeness for what it was and nodded back. The coroner was an
older man—probably in his early 60’s if Tim had to guess and he wondered how well he’d gotten
down that cliff.

“Looks like a vampire bite,” the older man said. “I need to get her back to the morgue and get her on
my table, but it looks like he bit her in the great saphenous vein instead of the femoral artery,”
Goodacher said.

The coroner pointed to the bite just inside the woman’s right thigh, then went on. “It’s a funny bite.
Most vampires go for the arteries. They’re more elastic and respond better to vampire saliva—both
the anticoagulant properties and the healing agents. Vein walls are thinner than artery walls—they
handle less blood pressure since its traveling back to the heart, which is why vampires always choose
arteries over veins.”

“Does that look jagged to you?” Tim said, pointing to the bite itself.

“It does,” he said. “Most vampire bites are clean.”

“Panic, maybe?” Tim guessed. He took out his cell phone and snapped a shot of the bite itself. “To
show my partner.”

The coroner nodded.

Tim thought about what the coroner said about the vein. “Maybe it’s a new vampire? Or a badly
trained vampire who doesn’t know the difference between the femoral artery and the saphenous
vein?” Tim said. “The vein runs closer to the inner thigh… it’s a sexier bite.”

Goodacher’s brows popped up. “Interesting theory.”
“Guess we need to see who’s new to the neighborhood.”

“Good luck with that,” the man scoffed. “We’ve been inundated with new vampires moving into the area since the new county master took over.”

Tim nodded. “Good to know. You have a time of death?”

The coroner sighed. “I’d say she died in the last twelve hours from liver temp and rigor mortis. Cold last night.”

“Die here?” Tim asked.

“Near as I can guess,” he said. “Livor mortis indicates she wasn’t moved from this position after death. Either died here or just before.”

Tim nodded. “You don’t happen to know if there’s anything in this water that’s gonna make me or my dog sick, do ya?”

The coroner laughed. “Thought you monster squad boys were made of tougher stuff than that.”

Tim scowled. “Apparently not. Did you get a measurement on that bite, by chance?” Tim asked. The fang size and the distance between the two fangs would help him and Raylan rule out some suspects if there was a question of who the biter was.

“I did,” Goodacher said, pulling out a notepad. “The intercanine width is 33.4 millimeters.”

Tim pulled his notepad out of his back pocket and jotted down the measurement. “Did you get all the swabs you need already?”

“Why?”

“You mind if my K-9 tries to pick up a scent?” Tim asked.

“Sure. I swabbed the bite.”

“Any chance I can get one?” Tim asked.

“Like…”

“Swab in a plastic evidence bag is fine,” Tim said. “We’re going to start here, but chances are there aren’t that many vampires still hanging around this time a day. I might need to reference it again.”

The coroner opened his kit and prepped a swab, running it around and over the bite, then dropping it into an evidence bag that he handed to Tim.

Tim eyed the victim again. “Does she have a lot of scarring on her neck? Those look like bites scars,” Tim said, pointing to the areas around her neck.

“Might be a vampire junkie,” Goodacher said. Vampire bites had the power to be euphoric and humans with addiction issues got caught up in chasing vampires for their highs like other addicts fell to drugs, booze, or gambling.

“Thanks,” Tim said, nodding. “Sheeba!” She trotted over to him.

He pointed to the bite on the victim’s thigh. “Here, girl.” She buried her nose around the skin where the bite was. “Seek Sheeba.”
The first thing she did was raise her mane and bark three times.

“What’s that mean?” the coroner asked.

“Ah, that’s her tell for a preternatural creature. Vampire, lycan… she’s looking for something that is other than human.”

“Seek Sheeba,” Tim repeated.

The Troll hound sniffed the air, turning around in place several times, then held her nose up and seemed to draw in a long whiff of air. Her body went on alert, facing the water in the direction of the bridge.

“Son of a bitch,” Tim muttered. “Wanna bet he knew the whole time.”

Sheeba jumped for the cliff, her paws digging into the side of the cliff aiding her as she scrambled up to the grass overlooking the river and body dump.

Tim dialed Raylan’s number. “Givens.”

“Incoming. Can you follow Sheeba and tell her to heel if she gets too far out?” Tim said. “Maybe hang on to her, too?”

“Sure. Find anything?”

“Did you know she was dropped off the bridge the whole time?”

“Ahh, I guessed. No way I was going down there, so I couldn’t see a vampire crawling all the way down there for a midnight snack. Oops. Sheeba’s back.”

Tim watched his dog with her nose to the bridge’s wooden planks, then Raylan jogged after her. “Be up in a few. Follow Sheeba for me.” Tim hung up.

“Did you find any impact wounds or indication that she fell from the bridge?” Tim asked.

“I haven’t moved the body yet,” Goodacher said. “The death seemed like exsanguination at first blush.”

“Can we look now?” Tim asked. “My partner and I think whoever killed her threw her off the bridge.”

“She’s a good fifteen feet away from the bridge…” the coroner started, sounding dubious.

“Vampires are strong,” Tim said, stating the obvious.

The coroner lifted her head and felt around the back of her skull. “Feels like there could be a fracture here. I just won’t know if there are pelvic, spine, or other fractures until I get her back to the morgue.”

Tim pulled out his wallet and from it a business card that he dropped into the coroner’s kit. “Will you please call me when you know?”

“I can do that,” the coroner said, standing up. “Can we load her up now? Are you finished?”

“Sure, let’s go.”
Tim stayed on the bank until the other techs rappelled down, moved the woman into a body bag, and strapped it to a spinal board they handed up the cliff.

Tim found Raylan with Sheeba and Tom Bergen waiting for him on the bridge. They had some crime techs on their knees around a faint blood trail down the bridge that Sheeba had found.

“I see she found some blood. Where’d she lead you to?” Tim asked.

“Over to a little pull off on Route 72, then she just stopped,” Raylan said.

“He got into a car, it sounds like,” Tim said.

“That’s what I thought,” Raylan said.

Tim ran down the details of what he’d learned from the coroner with Raylan and Bergen.

“I think you’re right,” Raylan said. “It sounds like a newly turned vampire or one who just doesn’t have good training.”

“Training?” Bergen asked, sounding a bit incredulous.

“Sure,” Raylan said. “New vampires are just humans who now drink blood. There’s a biological imperative to feed, but there’s not an inherent understanding of how to do that without killing their prey. That part has to be taught. With the legal ramifications in the US, we don’t see a lot of badly trained vampires. They’re generally motivated by the threat of someone like Tim or myself coming to visit if they don’t learn to feed without killing.”

“Geez,” Bergen said.

“Do we have an identification on the victim yet?” Tim asked.

“We pulled fingerprints before you got here. Got a hit while you were down with the doc. Krystal Anderson. Twenty-four. Exotic dancer.”

“Really?” Tim asked with interest.

His comment drew an odd look from both men.

“What? It’s a good lead?”

“Sure,” Raylan said, nodding but still eyeing Tim. Tim rolled his eyes—like Raylan didn’t already know Tim had no interest in women, much less dancing women.

“Where did she dance?” Tim asked.

“Place called…” Bergen flipped through a notepad. “Audrey’s? You know it?”

Raylan looked confused. “Know of it, yeah. I thought it was a… um…” Raylan waved his hand as if spelling out “bordello.”

“Whorehouse?” Bergen offered.

“House of ill repute. They have exotic dancers now?”

“Among other things. Word out is they have bite junkies and blood whores.”
“In Harlan?” Raylan reaffirmed.

“Since Boyd Crowder started that church of his, Harlan’s had a huge influx of vampires, not to mention the lycanthropes. We’ve got registered—and suspect unregistered weres—running around.”

All weres were supposed to register if they carried a strain of lycanthropy. Many, like the county coroner in Lexington Dr. Lillian, skipped registration and “passed” to avoid the stigma and prejudice that came with the lycanthrope status.

“Any particular flavor?” Raylan asked. Lycanthropes by definition were technically wolves, but as the existence of varying populations of wereanimals became public, the term had come to apply to all types of humans who carry some strain of lycanthropy—be it cat, rat, canine or amphibian.

“Wolf mostly,” Bergen said. “But I we’ve had some other strains register, and also haul out of town. The cat population pretty much bailed when Crowder displaced his daddy.”

Times were changing, slowly, but for many years most professions weren’t safe from the stigma of contracting lycanthropy from either a bite or scratch, an exchange of body fluids—including sex, or there were even cases of people contracting it from immunizations. A lycanthropy diagnoses could mean termination. Passing for human like the Lexington coroner meant control and control was learned in the lycan communities, just as it was within vampire kisses—or groups. As a result, lycanthropes tended to depend heavily on their community. As weres, they were ingrained biologically and culturally to form social communities, but the laws regarding forced registration, isolated them even more. Raylan wasn’t surprised to hear that they were either moving in or out of town in groups.

Raylan caught Tim’s eyes. He didn’t know what the other marshal was thinking, but if he had to hazard a guess it would be that with all the wolves moving in and the cats clearing out, that Boyd Crowder took after his daddy: if he had an animal to call, it was the wolf.

“I think we should go ahead and get the writ before nightfall,” Raylan said. “We can run by Audrey’s when we get back into town. But I think it sounds like we need to check out Boyd’s church.”

Tim nodded, agreeing.

“The writ?” Bergen asked.

“Writ of execution,” Raylan said. “Hmm. I think the closest Federal court is the District Courthouse over in Big Stone Gap across the Virginia state line. That’s only an hour away. We could call Art and get the AUSAs working on the paperwork, pick up the writ and be back in Harlan by nightfall.”

“How can you pull an execution warrant when you don’t even have the suspect’s first name?” Bergen asked.

Tim winced and Raylan looked a little shamefaced. It was one of the more criticized aspects of preternatural criminal law: an executioner didn’t need a name of a suspect on the warrant.

“Don’t need the name. The judge’ll issue the warrant to the vampire who killed Krystal Anderson. When we find the killer, we can exercise the warrant,” Tim said.

Bergen’s face scrunched up like he’d bit down on an apple to find it mealy and sour. “Doesn’t that make you guys the judge, jury, and executioner?”

Raylan pressed his lips together. “It’s not ideal.”
“Better hope you find the right guy,” Bergen said, shaking his head.

“Oh, we will,” Tim replied.

***

Raylan realized that Tim wasn’t very happy with him.

He had wanted to go to Ava’s old house and change his wet clothes before they made the trip east across the border into Virginia to collect the writ from Big Stone Gap. Tim seemed to think he smelled like the stinking river water. Raylan kept assuring him that he didn’t. Since his sense of smell was sharper than Tim’s, he didn’t feel too bad about pushing Tim into skipping the stop. Sheeba, however, did kind of stink, but she didn’t count.

They’d called Art on the way and he’d been something bordering on happy to make the calls to line up their writ of execution beforehand. He saw the pending execution as a potential chink in the armor of Boyd’s church. The master vampire still had an injunction against the US Attorney’s office moving to seize any properties that were being used as part of his church—calling on the protections built into the First Amendment covering the free exercise of religion and separation of church and state.

The judge at the Big Stone Gap courthouse had been amused to meet both the Executioner and Death, if a little put-off that they’d brought an, albeit smelly, Troll hound into his chambers. He’d assigned to Raylan a writ of execution for Krystal Anderson’s killer.

On their way back from Virginia, Dr. Goodacher called from the Harlan County Coroner’s office. Krystal had been dead when she was thrown from the bridge. Her cause of death was exsanguination—the single bite on her thigh was a mess, deep enough that it tore the great saphenous vein causing a catastrophic hemorrhage.

Raylan pointed Tim in the direction of Audrey’s.

“So, who was the Audrey this hell hole was named after?” Tim asked, as they pulled up outside, getting a look at the beat-down building. He had a view of a handful of travel trailers circled behind the building itself.

“Not all that sure. Always called that,” Raylan said. “Boyd’s mama had a little trailer out back.”

“You ever come here?” Tim asked, sitting behind the wheel staring out at the depressed property made gloomier in the gloaming of the day.

“Huh,” Raylan said. “Can’t believe you asked me that.”

Tim turned to look at him. “Did you?”

“Not how you mean,” Raylan said. “Couple times me ’n Boyd crawled under one of the trailers when the ladies were… entertaining. Looked in a window once ’til Bo caught us and beat the shit outta Boyd.”

“Doesn’t really look like the exotic dancing kind of place,” Tim said.

“All about those dancers, aren’t ya?”
Tim snorted. “Let’s get this over with,” Tim said.

Audrey’s smelled so much worse than Raylan remembered.

The front room came to a standstill after he and Tim stepped through the front door. The music still beat on, but the room had a static weight to it. All the conversation stopped and some faces were turned to them. A girl danced on a pole atop a bar toward the back, oblivious to the mood of the room.

Raylan could smell the desperation in the room. Under the obvious taint of booze and cigarettes, the reek of the desperation of Audrey’s employees and clientele eeked out in layers of stale lust, old tinny blood, and the scent of drug addiction that left a hint of sour bile in his sinuses.

A man with greasy brown hair approached.

“What can I do for you officers?” he said, cutting them off from reaching further into the room. Raylan watched the liquid way the man moved and scented the air. Wolf.

Raylan moved his hand to rest at his waist near his weapon.

“Marshals, actually. Deputy Marshal Raylan Givens and this is my partner, Deputy Gutterson.”

Raylan nodded to Tim squinting just enough to communicate his uneasiness. His eyes caught that the gesture wasn’t necessary. Tim had picked up nonverbal cues and his stance matched Raylan’s with his hand close to his weapon. He pulled his badge out with his left hand and flipped it open for the man.

“Are you the owner of this establishment?” Tim asked.

“Sure am. Delroy Baker.”

“We’re looking into the death of a Krystal Anderson. We understand she was an employee of yours?”

“Oh geez, yeah,” Delroy said. “Come on and sit down.” He led them to a table off to the side of the front room.

Tim took a seat with his back to the wall, and Raylan took one facing the door. He picked up the scent of Oxy on the wolf. Typically, drugs and alcohol did nothing for lycans because their body chemistry burned it off too quickly.

Raylan wondered how much OxyContin a lycanthrope had to ingest to be able to get remotely close to high or if Delroy had found a way to alter the drug so he could experience a sustainable high. If what Tom had said was true about the increased lycanthrope population, Delroy Baker might have a new burgeoning customer base.

“In what capacity did Krystal work for you, Mr. Baker,” Tim asked.

“Krystal danced and waited tables,” Delroy answered. “What happened to her?”

Neither Tim nor Raylan answered the question. “Was she working last night?”

The brothel owner looked back and forth between the marshals. Raylan wondered if he was trying to scent their emotions. Raylan wasn’t picking up any scent giveaways from Tim, and he’d been shielding hard since they came within a hundred miles of Harlan. Raylan didn’t think either marshal
could be giving anything away to Delroy.

“Mr. Baker?” Tim prompted him.

“Um… yeah. Early shift. She got off work about two in the morning,” Delroy said.

Tim’s brow furrowed. “That’s your early shift?”

“Well…” Delroy held his hands out. “We always had some vampire traffic, but since the vampires moved into town for the church, we’re busier and the shifts run on vampire hours. A lot of Harlan is like that… if they want to cater to the church members.”

“Were you around when Krystal got off work? Did she leave with anyone in particular or was anyone paying more attention to her than usual?” Tim asked.

“No, no. Not at all,” Delroy said. “Just the regular Thursday night. I think she left alone.”

Raylan smelled the lie. Actually both of them. “Mmm,” Raylan said. “You sure about that? You know that lying to us could be seen as impeding an investigation? If we found out you were an accessory to her murder, then you’d meet the same fate as her killer.”

Delroy looked back and forth between Raylan and Tim once more. “And what fate is that?”

“Deputy Gutterson and I are with the preternatural branch of the marshal service. We have an active writ of execution for her killer,” Raylan said.

“Fuck. How did she die?” Delroy asked once more.

“She had a vicious vampire bite to her inner thigh,” Tim said. “The coroner believes she died from blood loss, and then was tossed off the Baxter Bridge.”

“What bridge?” Delroy said, confused.

“The Old 119,” Raylan corrected.

“Ahh,” he said, shrugging. “Well, Krystal was a vampire junkie.”

Some humans prone to addiction got high from a vampire’s bite, from the vampire rolling them, from the euphoria that wasn’t dissimilar from an orgasm—only the high lasted longer and made them vulnerable to that vampire’s power. Once a vampire rolled a human, they could come back and call the person at any time and the human would be powerless against them.

“I saw the scarring,” Tim said.

“She’d gotten a lot better until all the church vamps moved in, then...” he said. “Well, some of those guys are pretty wild.”

“How so?” Raylan asked, not smelling a lie. In fact, Raylan thought he smelled a hint of fear.

The wolf licked his lips and rubbed his neck.

“Ah, there’s a bunch of them from the Midwest who act like frat boys. Not new vamps… just kind of wild. They’re great for business,” Delroy said. “Hard on some of the girls though.”

Tim’s brow furrowed, and Raylan inhaled slowly to keep from reacting. “Why does that make you uncomfortable, Delroy?” Raylan asked.
Delroy turned suspicious, narrowed eyes on Raylan and it looked like he was trying to scent the air to see what was different about Raylan. “I’m fine with it.”

“Do you know where we can find these men? The ones who were here last night?” Tim asked.

Raylan smelled Delroy’s anxiety spike again.

“Would they happen to be connected to Boyd Crowder’s church somehow?” Raylan offered.

Delroy nodded. “You know, now that you mention it, there were a couple deacons in last night. I think they were hanging around until Krystal got off work.”

They’d left Sheeba in the truck while they visited Audrey’s, but Tim insisted they bring her in when they visited the church to question Boyd. When they were in the parking lot, Tim pulled out a clear plastic bag with Evidence in red letters containing a cotton swab like crime techs used to collect buccal swabs for DNA samples. He held the cotton tip out to Sheeba. “Seek, girl. Seek,” he said.

She sniffed the air around her, finding her place and trotted off toward the church.

“Can I?” Raylan said, pointing to the swab.

Tim’s attention was on Sheeba, but he handed off the swab to Raylan. “Sure. If you can smell and walk at the same time.”

Raylan held the scent sample under his nose and tried to pick up what Sheeba had. He could smell a faint scent of vampire…. Musky and cloying, like the smell of rot under incense or body odor masked with patchouli oil. Raylan could tell it was a vampire’s scene, but which vampire it was, Raylan had no clue.

“She is good.” Raylan handed the swab back to Tim to deposit back inside the evidence bag.

“You’re a necromancer with a cheap upgrade to your smell receptors. Sheeba’s the real deal,” Tim said, sounding pleased.

Raylan smiled and bumped Tim’s shoulder with his own. They caught up with Sheeba at the door where a worried man was watching her smelling the ground in front of the closed doors. To Raylan, he smelled human and scared.

“Is this your dog? Gentlemen, I must insist you…” the man trailed off, his eyes big when they fell on Raylan and Tim, his finger pointing at Raylan. “You… you’re the Executioner.”

Raylan pulled out his badge and held it out. The man snatched back the hand that had been pointing at Raylan as if he’d just now realized it could be construed as rude.

“Deputy Marshal Raylan Givens. We’d like to see Boyd Crowder.”

Tim opened the door and followed Sheeba into the church.

“Sir!” The man turned to Raylan. “He can’t just walk right in with that animal…. ”

“He just did,” Raylan said. “And it’s a church. You think God doesn’t love dogs?”

“It’s not God I’m worried about,” the man said.

“Don’t worry. Boyd likes them, too.” Raylan patted the man’s shoulder, then followed Tim into the church.
Raylan found Tim still in the narthex, holding onto the top of Sheeba’s K-9 vest. She was straining toward the aisle separating the sections of the nave.

The man followed them into the entrance area literally wringing his hands. Raylan turned to him.
“Can you run find Boyd for us? Just tell him Raylan Givens is here,” Raylan said, feeling Boyd not far off. “Though, I expect he already knows.”

“Why Raylan, to what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from not only you but your esteemed companion?” Boyd appeared from a door off to the side, wearing all black.

“Boyd,” Raylan drawled out his name. “We’re here on marshal business. Do you mind if Tim and our K-9 check out the church? We have reason to believe a murder suspect is on the premises.”

Boyd moved toward Raylan, smooth and fluid. Not that Boyd was uncoordinated in life, but death hadn’t done his grace any damage.

“This isn’t going to end in bloodshed in my new church, is it?” Boyd said.

Raylan tipped his head in Tim’s direction and headed into the nave where Boyd’s congregation was gathering. “Don’t forget, I’ve got a pretty good idea how much blood is shed in your church,” Raylan said. “From the power spikes, I’d say nightly blood oaths.”

Boyd shrugged with his hands open. “The cost of doing business and saving souls.”

“Sure. You keep on tellin’ yourself that,” Raylan said.

“I do need to ask, what is this about?” Boyd said.

“We had a girl killed last night. Vampire bite. Inner thigh,” Raylan said. “Dog picked up the scent off the bite.” He tipped his head in Tim and Sheeba’s direction.

Boyd sighed. “Raylan, I can’t let you put down one of my parishioners in cold blood in our church.”

“We won’t do it in the church,” Raylan said. “And if he’s guilty, Boyd, it won’t be in cold blood.”

Raylan and Boyd reached Tim and Sheeba with a group of three male vampires who all looked like they died in the height of middle-age when it had began to spiral for them. They were paunchy men complete with comb-overs. Two were dressed like used car salesmen—cheap suits paired with loose loud ties around their necks that had wide tails stretching down over their bellies of a fashion a few decades too long gone. The third man was the outlier. Raylan didn’t need his necromancy to tell him the other two were longer dead—fashion indicated that much. This one though, if he’d been dead two years Raylan would be surprised.

“You gentlemen know a Krystal Anderson?”

The younger man’s eyes got wide and Raylan knew who their biter was, even if Sheeba hadn’t picked him out with her hackles raised. Raylan raised his eyes from the third vampire to Tim and his partner gave him a short nod to indicate, yes, this is the one.

“Boyd, do you have an office that we could all step into so we could speak privately?” Raylan said. He thought, Sound-proofing would be nice.

It was a mistake, thinking to Boyd. Raylan held the reins on his inner thoughts like he did when he communicated with Nahtoo back in New Mexico when she was in her dragon form. Still, this close to him, mental telepathy was a bad idea.
“This way,” Boyd said, leading them back toward the door he’d initially come in through. *Are you going to kill my parishioner, Raylan?*

*Probably. He killed a woman last night, Boyd. The law is the law. Already have the execution warrant.*

*You don’t know it’s him.*

*Before we execute the writ, we’ll make sure.*

“Let’s talk in my office,” Boyd said. “It’s private.” His eyes met Raylan’s and Raylan nodded his approval. Since Bo marked Raylan, he’d been able to meet a vampire’s eyes without being affected by their powers. He didn’t know if that ability carried over because of Bo or was renewed when Boyd marked him, making Raylan his human servant.

His name was Jack Benchley and he’d been dead less than six months. He’d gone to Audrey’s with two older vampires, a new church deacon named Charles Moffat and another vampire from the church, Clarke. All three were transplants from Missouri—all three changed by Malcolm, but now blood-oathed to Boyd Crowder and parishioners of his church.

Jack cried when he confessed that he hadn’t meant to kill Krystal.

“Just never met a woman who’d let me drink from her thigh,” Benchely mumbled, hiccupping, which in itself told Raylan how new he was to death. Vampires didn’t need air—the hiccupping was directly connected with what was left of his humanity. But the blood collecting in his face because of either his embarrassment or his emotional outburst reminded Raylan that as much as Benchely might react like a human, he was now an entirely different creature. The tears trailing his cheeks left red streaks in their path, another reminder that not only had Krystal given three-quarters of her blood to Benchley the night before but someone had more than likely donated more blood today for his evening meal. Benchely might not act like it, but he was now a predator rather than prey.

“Who’d you have for breakfast, Jack?” Raylan asked. “Or are those tears all that’s left of Krystal’s life?”

Defiant, the young vampire didn’t answer.

Raylan looked over at Boyd, then he felt the cold rush of Boyd’s power rise and wash in their direction.

“Answer him, Jack.”

“Bagged.” The vampire answered as if it was against his will. And, it probably was. As Jack’s blood-oathed master, Boyd’s orders were law to his vampires. Ironically, his orders were on par with being Godlike, which was probably why Malcolm didn’t try to blood-oath the vampires his church members turned. But apparently, Malcolm also had done a shit job of shepherding them.

“What? You can’t talk someone into donating if you’re not paying or killing them?” Tim asked.

Raylan winced at his words, but he was right. Tom had told them that Audrey’s employed blood addicts and blood prostitutes. The odds were if Jack frequented there, he’d probably paid someone for their blood.

“It wasn’t like that,” Jack sighed. “Malcolm wouldn’t let us bite from the leg. It violated the morality
clause we signed.”

“Morality clause?” Raylan asked.

“Some of my parishioners who moved to Harlan from St. Louis signed a ‘morality clause’ with their former church leader,” Boyd explained. “We do things differently here.”

“You mean you blood-oath them,” Raylan said.

“It’s the traditional vampiric power structure, Raylan,” Boyd said. “I don’t think you want vampires running around with no control measures in place.”

“Well, the law is supposed to provide that,” Raylan said. “But you’re right, we don’t.”

“So, walk us through this. You took Krystal out to the bridge to try out a sexier bite?” Tim asked.

“No… that happened back in the car,” Jack admitted, looking between Raylan and Tim.

“When did she die?” Raylan asked.

“After the bite.”

“Did you two know about this?” Boyd pointed at the other two vampires with Jack. Their eyes were huge. One shook his head and the other promptly answered, “No master.”

“She wouldn’t stop bleeding,” Jack whispered.

“Did you try to help her or just drink her?” Tim asked. “If you’d taken her to the hospital, they could have sutured the tear in her vein.”

“I… I was afraid they’d send the Executioner after me,” Jack said.

“Idiot,” Clarke muttered.

“What?” Jack turned to his peers.

“Do you not realize this here is Deputy Marshal Raylan Givens?” Boyd said, waving his hand in Raylan’s direction. “Otherwise known as…”

“The Executioner,” Jack finished, his voice thin with fear. “I swear I didn’t mean to kill her.”

“Then what did you mean to do when you threw her off the bridge?” Raylan demanded.

Jack didn’t answer.

“We talked to the coroner this evening,” Raylan said. “He told us that you bit her saphenous vein instead of the femoral artery. Did you lose control or just not know where it’s safe to bite humans? That you never go for the veins, but always the arteries?”

“I didn’t… wait. There’s a difference?” Jack said, confused.

“Boyd, are you even bothering with some version of Vampire 101 for any of these vampires you’re changing or bringing into Harlan?” Raylan said, turning to Boyd.

“Well, Raylan, Jack and his friends here haven’t been in Harlan more than a week,” Boyd replied, holding up his hands as if the matter hadn’t been his to control.
“But that didn’t stop you from blood-oathing them, did it?” Raylan argued.

A silence stretched out in the room.

“Are you inferring this is my responsibility?” Boyd asked, letting his arms fall to his side.

“Not anymore Boyd,” Raylan said, pulling out the writ of execution for Jack and handing it to the vampire master. “Now it’s mine.”

Boyd took the legal document and walked over behind his desk. Raylan turned back to the condemned vampire.

“Jack Benchley, you admit you caused the vampire bite that ended up taking Krystal Anderson’s life? That you failed to seek medical help to save her life?” Raylan asked.

“Yeah, but….” Jack said before his forehead blew out backwards, his blood, brain matter and skull spattering the wall.

The reverberation of the gunshot in such a small room numbed Raylan’s ears. But he automatically drew his weapon, turning around to search out his target on instinct. By the time he took stock of his partner, Tim had his weapon out pointing it at Boyd, who held a gun still aimed in Jack’s direction.

Boyd slowly laid his weapon on the desk, then held up his hands to Raylan and Tim in surrender.


“I do believe, Raylan, that you made a fine point,” Boyd said. “Jack, there, was my responsibility.”

Raylan and Tim stood dumbfounded.

“And Clarke and Charles here, now they know that if they cross their master and human laws by taking a human life, they won’t have to wait for the Executioner to come around,” Boyd said. “Don’t think it’ll take long for word to spread to my other parishioners.”

“I… meant… Boyd, you just can’t go around killing vampires,” Raylan said. “They have rights.”

“He was my vampire, Raylan, part of my kiss. Is it also not the custom of vampires, and law enforcement alike, to let vampires first take care of their own?” Boyd said.

Tim tilted his head to the side as if he was letting the reasoning settle at a different angle so he could translate it to Raylan. “He’s got a point,” Tim said. “We don’t wade into vampire politics. If they’re going to kill each other, the Federal government doesn’t care as long as they don’t take any humans with them.”

“You were going to kill him if I hadn’t, Raylan,” Boyd said.

Raylan looked between Boyd and Tim. “Are you all right with this?” Raylan asked Tim.

He watched his partner’s eyes pan the room roaming from Boyd, to Raylan, then to the dead vampire and his two remaining friends, covered in spatter and hovering as far as they could get away from Jack’s body.

“At least I don’t have to measure his fang distance this way…” Tim said. “But yeah, I actually am okay with it.”

“Fine,” Raylan said reluctantly. “But we still need to burn the head and the heart.”
For the second time that day, Raylan and Tim cooled their jets by Tim’s truck while they waited for fire to have its way with human bone. Sheeba slept in the backseat. Raylan and Tim sat on the tailgate.

This time around, they were parked in the back of Boyd’s church watching fire consume Jack’s skull and heart and turn them to ash. They’d sent the rest of the vampire’s body to the morgue for cremation by the county under the writ of execution. Raylan and Tim would spread the ashes from the head and heart separately. Jack was a young vampire so the chances of reanimation of his body were small—but taking the heart and head to dispose of separately from his body made reanimation impossible.

“I can’t believe you’re all right with this,” Raylan said.

“What? Should we get an order for Boyd’s death because he killed a vampire he had every right to discipline? Besides the live and let live philosophy of the marshal service in regards to vamp politics, if one of us takes Boyd’s life while he’s still bound to you…” Tim trailed off.

“I know,” Raylan said. “It’d take me with him. So, what do we tell Art?”

“The truth. Except maybe that last bit of reasoning there,” Tim said, then he sighed. “Maybe Boyd’s right, and any other bad vampires he’s got running around Harlan will be motivated to behave.”

“It’s not the bad little vampires in Harlan I’m worried will misbehave.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all who've been following this fic, who leave comments, kudos, bookmark and subscribe. It's a motivating to know y'all are out there waiting for a new chapter.

Good news on the progress front--I rewrote the remaining outline for "Three in the Day" this last weekend, taking into account the stuff I want to happen in book three, as yet untitled in my mind. I'm doing Nano this year and working on this WIP for it. I am hoping between Nano and down time in December I can get this book wrapped by the end of the year. : )
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Jonjo for beta-reading and helping me make sure all the world-building I laid down here jibes with where we're going and where we've been.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tim rinsed Raylan’s shampoo from Sheeba’s hair, letting the suds take the last of the Cumberland River stink down the drain of Ava Crowder’s former bathtub. Tim had been waiting all day to get the river smell off both Sheeba and himself.

By the time they finished with Jack’s ashes, Raylan agreed it was too late to head back to Lexington. As soon as they’d gotten back to the marshals service’s house, Tim herded Sheeba upstairs into the bath. She had a habit of tucking up next to Raylan in bed at night. If Tim could smell her, he knew Raylan would later that night. Besides, Tim didn’t want whatever made her fur stink in his bed. It’d been bad enough wearing it on his clothes all day.

The best he could do was towel-dry her. After rubbing her up and down, he opened the bathroom door sending her out into the house with a yell.

“I’m taking a shower. Don’t let her outside until she’s dry.” Then, he closed the door. “She’ll find something nasty to roll around in,” he muttered.

Tim was rinsing the conditioner out of his hair when he heard the bathroom door open and shut. He turned off the water and froze. “Ray?”

“Who else would it be?”

“Just checking,” Tim answered, a part of his brain making a plan for what he would have done had it not been Raylan on the other side of the plastic curtain while he stood there wet, naked, and weaponless. Tim thought of the cleaner he used for the tub after Sheeba’s bath. That would have been effective in an intruder’s eyes—if he’d gotten the chance to get close enough.

All strategic thought ran out of his head when he heard the teeth of a zipper, followed by the unmistakable sound of Raylan taking a piss.

Tim took a breath before he pulled back the shower curtain. “You couldn’t have waited?”

“Uh-uh,” Raylan murmured, his eyes sliding his way.

Tim found himself steeling himself against a wave of self-consciousness. He’d never played sports growing up so the idea of a communal shower was a culture shock when he hit Basic training. Tim scrubbed his wet hair not quite long enough and wrapped the burnt-orange towel around his waist. He tried to ignore Raylan standing there with his penis in his hand. Lately, their boundaries have been blurring more and more and Tim was still not sure what to make of the mix of their really personal grooming. It had never been something that he’d ever been around enough to face with Peter.
“Did you wash the dog with my shampoo?”

Tim stepped out of the tub and grinned, flashing his teeth at Raylan. “I sure did.”

“Is that good for her?” Raylan said, giving himself a shake and zipping his jeans up three-quarters to the button. He’d lost his shirt somewhere and was bare-chested, his taut stomach muscles distracting Tim.

“Won’t that mess with her sense of smell?” Raylan asked.

“Huh?” Tim said, then shook his head to clear it. “Nah,” he said, shrugging, then pursed his lips reconsidering. “Well... probably not? We already served the writ. Maybe just don’t mention it to Peter. Like ever.” Tim grinned.

He headed over to the sink to work styling cream into his hair when Raylan came up behind him, his hands resting where the towel met Tim’s hips. He kissed his bare shoulder. “I like your hair longer,” Raylan said. He moved across the landscape of Tim’s shoulders, his tongue lingering on the drops of water still beaded on Tim’s skin, capturing one, then the next, and the next one after that.

Tim shivered while he watched and felt the wet warmth of Raylan’s progress across one shoulder and up to his neck. He let his head tip to the side to give Raylan his way.

Raylan’s hand tugged up the towel dragging the edge up to a point where he could slip his hand underneath and slide it up his leg to his hip. “Want you,” he said.

“Yeah?”

Tim watched Raylan in the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet above the sink, his lover’s mouth on his neck, his eyes peering back at him through their reflections.

Raylan pulled the towel end free and let the damp cloth fall loose, pinned between them. Raylan shifted, tugged it free, and tossed it over the edge of the tub.

“Want you just like this,” Raylan whispered in his ear. He ran his hands up the back of Tim’s legs to his ass, pulling his cheeks apart and pressing against him, grinding his hips.

Tim leaned back into Raylan, turning his head and lifting his face for a kiss. Raylan took his chin in hand and kissed him.

He could feel Raylan move around him for something on the sink, then he heard the clatter of something hitting the porcelain. Tim pulled back from the kiss to find their tube of lube had rolled down into the bottom of the basin.

“Plan this?”

“Had a thought.”

“I do like the way you think,” Tim said, smiling.

He felt Raylan unzip his jeans again and free himself from his boxers, then heard the rip of the condom package.

“Really do think we should get tested,” Tim offered.

“Next week,” Raylan said, lifting his eyes to meet Tim’s in the mirror which reassured him that his partner was serious about the idea regardless of what he’d teased him about earlier that day. “Do me
a favor and open that lube,” he said, then tugged on Tim’s earlobe with his teeth.

Tim flipped the cap open, and Raylan reached around him, holding out his hand. “Come on. Lay it on me and I’ll do the honors,” Raylan said.

“Uh-huh, sure you will.” Tim let his eyes fall from him to squeeze a dollop of lube onto Raylan’s fingers.

“You know what would be kinda dirty?” Raylan asked, his eyes had found Tim’s again in the mirror.

Tim felt his stomach muscles tighten up. “What?”

“Hold yourself open for me.”

He licked his lips, then stretched his arms back to do Raylan’s bidding, pulling his cheeks apart.

Raylan wrapped one arm around Tim, searching out one of his nipples with his fingers, rolling it with the pad of a calloused finger before pinching it. Tim then felt Raylan’s fingers applying lube between his cheeks, circling around his hole before sliding inside him.

They watched each other’s expressions as Raylan’s fingers worked at spreading lube and loosening Tim’s muscles. Tim felt his dick thicken despite the cool white ceramic sink pressed up against his balls and the base of his cock. He felt suddenly torn between humping the sink and Raylan’s fingers.

“I’m ready. I’m ready,” Tim said, a little breathless.

Raylan bent his knees, aligned his cock with Tim’s ass and slowly pressed into him. “Keep your hands where they are and lean back against me,” Raylan said, his voice ground in Tim’s ear like fine sandpaper.

At first his back-and-forth strokes were a gentle kind of brutality as he would move slowly then snap his hips into Tim. Raylan fingers strayed from Tim’s nipple to work themselves into Tim’s chest hair. He gripped the sink with his other hand as they began to fuck in earnest. Tim crept up onto his tiptoes so that the angle of the sink hit his upper thighs. While the shift in position made it easier for him to fuck Raylan, a particularly intense set of thrusts must have been one pound of pressure too much. They heard the crack of brittle plaster and felt the sink give under their weight. They both froze in place.

“Shit shit shit,” Tim said.

“We’re not telling Art about that,” Raylan said. He wrapped his arms around Tim and started to move backwards, pulling him with him.

“Fuck. You’re not allowed to mention Art when you have your dick up my ass,” Tim said, flailing his arms.

Raylan huffed. “Fair point,” he said, backing away and sliding free of Tim altogether. “Come over here.”

Tim had the sense that he still wanted to flail, the sudden emptiness inside him where Raylan had just been, there with him, part of him. He barely caught his breath before Raylan pushed his back against the closed bathroom door and slid to his knees before him. It was too much for Tim for a moment.

“We um, we have a bed in there we could go to,” Tim offered.
“Can’t,” Raylan answered.

“Why not?” Tim was confused.

“It’s full of wet dog. We’re gonna have to hunt down a spare set of sheets before bed,” Raylan said. Tim groaned. “Why’d you let her do that?”

“You said not to let her outside,” Raylan said. “She seemed to like it.”

“You’re a pushover.”

“Maybe, now shut up and let me do this already. I’m not down here for no reason,” Raylan said.

The reminder that Raylan was on his knees before him stunned Tim. There was only one obvious reason Tim could think of for him to be in that position.

“I know we talked about this today… but I meant what I said. You never have to…”

“Shut up Tim,” Raylan said, and he wrapped his hand around Tim’s cock to quiet him.

“Ray?” Tim said. “You sure?”

“No, not at all. So hush, and let’s see what happens.”

Raylan licked Tim’s softening cock from the curve of its base up to the tip. He twirled his tongue around the head, exploring Tim again like it was the first time.

Tim let his head fall back against the door with an audible thunk. He wanted to dig his fingers into Raylan’s hair—badly—but he didn’t dare.

Instead, his hands found the top of his partner’s broad shoulders.

“This all right?” Tim asked. “My hands like this?”

Raylan took his cock into his mouth before he answered. “Mmm-hmm,” Raylan said, the vibration of his agreement forcing a groan out of Tim.

He watched his partner’s head bob on his cock through slitted eyes. He dug the pads of his fingers into Raylan’s broad shoulders while he watched him make progress. He wanted to stroke Raylan’s hair or cheek, but he didn’t want to startle him. He wasn’t the only one whose hair had grown out some since they arrived in Kentucky.

“Ray,” Tim said, running a thumb across Raylan high cheekbone. “I’m gonna come… pull off. I wanna finish fucking.”

Raylan sat back on his heels, looking up at Tim with a satisfied expression. He nodded and stood up.

“Turn around for me?” Raylan asked.

He stepped forward and wrapped a hand around the back of Raylan’s head, his fingers finding their way into his hair finally. He pulled him down into a kiss, pressing his tongue into his mouth. Raylan tasted like whiskey and pre-cum.

Tim broke the kiss and turned around to face the door. Raylan carded his fingers from his left hand through Tim’s fingers and pressed their joined palms against the door—Raylan holding Tim’s
captive. Tim started to look back at Raylan over his right shoulder when his partner pressed him to the door, his cheek and shoulders flat to the worn once-glossy white paint.

A few short deep thrusts had Tim back up on his toes, with his ass tilted up and back to meet Raylan’s hips so his lover pinged him in just the right spot. Raylan reached around and stroked him off as he came, jerking his own release into the condom. Tim, instead, added yet another insult to poor Ava’s house, finally refreshing the paint on the back of her bathroom door.

Raylan hadn’t been kidding. Sheeba had made a hell of a mess of the bed they’d been using in the master bedroom. They couldn’t find another set of sheets and gave up, sleeping in the smaller double bed in a guest room.

Tim was curled behind Raylan. His lips were at the nape of Raylan’s neck where he liked to trace the direction of a slight cowlick with his lips and nose. Tim found it one night only after Raylan’s hair had grown out long enough for him to differentiate the direction of its growth.

“You’re right,” Raylan said.

Tim coughed, surprised. “Um, about what?”

“I’ve got to get free of Boyd. Sooner rather than later,” Raylan said. “We can dress it up, but he put that vampire down without a second thought.”

“I think it was a matter of vamp politics,” Tim said. “This time.”

“That’s what I mean. This time,” Raylan replied. “What about next time?”

“Well, there’s always the turning option,” Tim countered. He held his breath waiting for an angry response from his partner.

Raylan pulled out of Tim’s hold, rolled over, and faced Tim. “If you tell me that this is something you honestly want… that you want to be a vampire, I’d consider it.”

Tim didn’t answer him. He couldn’t see Raylan’s features in the darkness but he could feel the tension stretched taut and thin between them.

“Do you want to become a vampire? Honestly?” Raylan asked.

Tim sighed. “No. But…”

“But what?”

“It goes back to Calaeno’s prophecy,” Tim said. “It’s a solution that fits.”

“There’s got to be other solutions,” Raylan said.

“But what if those solutions mean giving up my life for dead instead of undead?” Tim had never been afraid to die.

“I’m not going to let you die,” Raylan said.

“I’m not afraid of that happening, Ray,” Tim said. “But… I don’t want to leave you.”

Raylan’s lips found his in the darkness. “That’s a good thing. ’Cause that’s the last thing I want, too.”
Tim sighed. “Ideas?”

“Let’s go to Grant’s holler tomorrow after we check in with Art. Maybe some of my kin have an idea on how to get a handle on this.”

***

“Now why exactly do we need to go to Cumberland before we go hunting for your long-lost relatives?” Tim asked. He thanked the girl in the Hardee’s drive-thru window and handed off a bag of food, then a cup of coffee to Raylan.

“Because I can’t go up the mountain without a bottle of mash,” Raylan answered. “Specifically White Dog Mash number one.” Raylan wedged his cup into the holder on his side of the console and then fished around in the bag. He handed Tim a sausage, egg, and cheese biscuit, who took the food but grimaced at it. Raylan shrugged. No accounting for taste.

They’d barely made it in under the 10:30 breakfast cut-off. He figured by the time they got to Cumberland to pick up the bottle of whiskey and then back to Harlan and over to Indian Line Road, it would be pushing noon.

“We might as well call Art,” Raylan said. They’d checked in with Rachel the night before.

“Mullen,” Art barked over the speaker.

“Art,” Raylan said by way of greeting. “I got Tim here with me and you on speaker.”

“I talked to Rachel,” the chief said. “Crowder really put your vampire down for you?”

“Uh… yeah. He got the drop on us. We’d established guilt and I guess Boyd didn’t want to risk his other vamps running amok,” Raylan said. He saw Tim glance over at him and he shrugged back.

“Huh. Maybe I need to hire Crowder?”

“Don’t think Vasquez would be all that happy with that. He barely tolerates me ’n Tim,” Raylan said.

“Well you’re wrong there,” Art said, chuckling. “He’s over the moon with you this morning.”

“Come again?” Raylan said.

“Boyd Crowder both harboring a murderer and putting that murderer down inside this church of his, muddies the water around the injunction that vampire lawyer of his slapped on the US attorney’s office blocking the seizure of his church,” Art said.

“Really.” Raylan hadn’t thought there’d be a silver lining to the events of the night before. He and Tim were so worried about Art realizing Raylan was tied to Boyd, that they didn’t think through the implications of Boyd killing a vampire with rights within the walls of his church.

“Really,” Art said. “The pencil pushers are working on it this weekend. If it goes to plan, we’ll send Rachel down to you on Monday with the paperwork to begin pre-seizure on his church—with your car, by the way. Can you two manage to stay out of trouble for a weekend down there?”

Tim huffed as he swallowed what sounded like part of a laugh. “We’ll try, Art,” he said.

“We’re just checking in with some of my old kin,” Raylan said.
“Jesus. If your daddy is anything to go by, maybe you should try taking in a movie or something normal,” Art said.

“How is Arlo?” Raylan asked.

“Surly. Useless,” Art said.

“No good info to trade?” Tim asked.

“Well, Arlo thinks so. Rachel says he’s full of shit—”

“I could have told you that,” Raylan said.

“But we’re talking to him. If nothing else, we send him up to the federal pen and be done with him.”

“Big Sandy, then.” Raylan sighed. “Well, I really expected no less.”

“I’ll let you know if you should expect Rachel,” Art said.

“We’ll touch base with you tomorrow. My kin lives up in the hills—might be out of cell range,” Raylan said.

“I won’t worry until tomorrow night then,” Art said.

“You won’t worry at all,” Raylan countered.

“Raylan, when it comes to you and Tim running around Harlan County, my worryin’ is a given.”

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They found Indian Line Road, and after Raylan pointed out his aunt’s old house, he had Tim drive up and up into the hills before they ran out of road and he had to park.

“The more ground we cover with wheels, the better the odds are we’ll get back before dark. Wouldn’t count on it though,” Raylan said.

Tim let Sheeba out of the truck, and Raylan followed Tim back to the bed of his truck, his bottle of hootch in paper bag in hand. His partner pulled a backpack out and shoved it in Raylan’s direction.

“What’s this?”

“Your backpack.”

“I don’t need this…”

“What are the chances we’ll spend the night up there?”

“I’d say fair, if it goes well,” Raylan said.

“If it doesn’t?” Tim said. He had that “scentless” tick spray out again, spraying down his arms and legs.

“We’d do better with guns than camping crap,” Raylan said.

Tim’s stare was cold and dead-eyed for moment. “At least you didn’t wait to tell me that until we were up the trail. Spray my back, then you might want to spray yourself,” Tim said. He turned his back to Raylan holding out his arms. He sprayed Tim, then handed him back the can.
“You don’t want any?” Tim took the spray.

“That stuff stinks,” Raylan said. “Besides, I never pick up ticks.”

“How do you know?”

“Just never have,” Raylan said.

“Anything with blood can pick up ticks,” Tim reasoned.

“Nope,” Raylan said shrugging, then he smiled seductively. “But if it’ll make you happy, I’ll let you check me over as thoroughly as you please when we get back to the house.”

Tim grinned back at him.

They’d been hiking for about two hours when Tim stopped in front of him, holding up a fist after Sheeba barked sharply, then circled back to them. She crashed through the brush making more noise than whatever had alerted her and Tim.

“We got company,” Tim said.

“I guessed as much,” Raylan said. He looked around but the terrain was the same woods and undergrowth they’d been climbing through. He didn’t recognize landmarks or anything from when he’d come up with his mama. Apparently, their trips weren’t something she’d shared with her sister. Helen didn’t seem to realize this wasn’t Raylan’s first time up the hills surrounding Grant’s holler. To that end, Raylan let the backpack slide off one of his shoulders and lowered it to the ground. He unzipped the top compartment and pulled out the bottle of 125 proof Buffalo Trace White Dog still wrapped in its Kraft brown paper bag. It was the closest he could get to over-the-counter corn mash that still had the bite of ’shine. Raylan stepped up in front of Tim. “Whatever you do, don’t pull on them…” Raylan said.

“Unless?”

“You have to?”

A moment later two men appeared out of the trees carrying shotguns aimed in their direction. Raylan heard Tim command Sheeba to heel, circumventing an attack on the armed men.

Raylan held his hands above his head with the brown bagged bottle still in his hand. He shot Tim a glance to find he had one hand tight around Sheeba’s harness and his other in the air.

“This here’s private property. State yer business or head on back the way you came,” one man told them. The other glared.

“Actually, I’m pretty sure this part of the hill is state land, but yy name is Raylan Givens. I’m a US deputy marshal and this here is my partner. We’re up here on personal business. My aunt Helen said I needed to come talk to her cousin, Mary.”

“You saying you kin to Mary?”

“My mother’s cousin… guess that would be my first cousin once removed?”

“Whatchu got in that poke there?” the other man asked, nodding at the bottle Raylan held above his head.

Raylan pulled the bottle out of the bag—or poke, a term he hadn’t heard since his childhood—and
showed the label to the men. “When my mama brought me up to see Granny Eunice, she always brought a bottle of hooch. Back then, my grandad on the other side had a side business. This here… it’s as close as I can come. She still around?”

The two men exchanged a look, straightening up a bit.

“Better come on then, Miss Eunice don’t take to folks gettin’ between her and her ’shine.”

Tim told Sheeba to walk to heel and they followed the men on up into a grouping of houses.

“Who’s Granny Eunice?” Tim asked quietly.

“Hmm. Let’s see. My maternal grandmother’s younger sister, I think. Always just called my grandmother, Granny, then her two sisters by that title instead of aunt,” Raylan explained. “They were all… well, used to call ’em granny witches.”

Raylan had tried to explain the old women in his family who practiced Appalachian Granny Magic once to Rachel. He always thought that his necromancy came down the line from wherever their hoodoo originated—though their line of work tilted toward folk healing, finding water, and natural magic.

“Not sure what the term is these days. It’s not Wiccan—too region specific. If I had a wart or other ailment, my mama would haul me up the mountain every so often. Arlo never did like it much, but then I think he was afraid of the grannies.”

“Raylan, how scary were they if they scared your daddy?” Tim asked.

The men led them in front of a house Raylan had a dim memory of from childhood, nodded to an old woman, who was ninety if she was a day. She saw them approach but never stopped rocking.

“Get on now, boys,” she said.

Their escorts gave Raylan and Tim another once-over, then moved on away.

“I told your mama you’d grow up tall,” she said.

Raylan cleared his throat. “Me?”

“Frances’ boy. With the weird name. Like your daddy thought he could tie you to the land if he mixed half of Harlan into it. Did it work, young’un? You tied to the land?”

“I sure hope not.”

She honest-to-god harrumphed at him.

“Granny Eunice?” Raylan asked, sounding incredulous. It wasn’t so much that he was amazed to find this old relic still alive and kicking when his own mama was dead and gone, but that last bit about his name, he’d never been told that.

She cackled at him.

“That poke got my ’shine in it?” she asked him.

He pulled the bottle free of the bag and handed it over. She grabbed the bottle, but also gripped his narrow wrist in her fist. “Ahh. Got free of the land, but then you came on back. Not so free now, are you young’un?”
Raylan waited for her to release his arm. He could feel her testing his power... the electric tingle that crawled across his skin from where she held his wrist. “My aunt Helen said I should come talk to Mary,” he said.

Eunice let his arm go. She picked futilely at the seal around the neck of the bottle with gnarled, weathered fingers. “May I?” Raylan offered.

She handed him the bottle, and he pulled the plastic seal off the top of the bottle. If it’d been only the tax stamp strip across the top, she’d have been able to knock it out herself. He handed the bottle back to her after using his thumbnail to slice the tax stamp on each side where the flat head of the cork met the bottle.

“Always were a good boy,” she said, pausing her rocking chair for the first time since they’d walked up. She took the T-cork in her teeth and yanked it out. She dropped the cork into her hand and took a long draw from the bottle that made Raylan wince.

She sighed and recorked the bottle, holding it against her stomach while she resumed rocking. “Not as good as your grandaddy’s mash, but got enough of a bite to make do.” She pulled a knobby walking stick off the rocker beside her and banged it against the wall behind her.

“Mary! Got a young’un here to see you!”

A woman close to Helen’s age found her way onto the porch from inside.

“Can I help you?” she eyed Raylan cautiously. Her gaze slipped over to Eunice, taking in the bottle. “Oh great Goddess, you brought her hooch.”

“I…” Raylan started. “We always... I mean... I thought I was supposed to,” he said.

“Thought right—” Eunice said, winking at Raylan.

“It doesn’t react well with her blood pressure meds,” Mary interrupted.

Eunice shrugged. “Not like I take that poison,” the old woman said, humming.

Mary sighed. “Granny Eunice,” Mary admonished. “Skipping your meds is bad for your heart.”

Raylan was thoroughly confused.

Eunice laughed. “Bein’ ninety-three is bad for my heart. Mary girl, when I get my call I’m plannin’ to be ready to follow on.” She rocked happily. Raylan eyed Tim, wondering what he was making of this.

“Not sure I understand,” Raylan said. “Thought the whole granny magic deal made modern medicine redundant.”

Mary scoffed. “Witchcraft has its purpose. So does a surgeon and modern medicine. There’s things folk magic just don’t cure. Why would we cut ourselves off from that?” she asked. “Only fools know everything.”

“Makes sense to me,” Tim said.

“And, may I ask, who are you?” Mary said.

“Sorry. I’m Raylan Givens. This is my partner Tim... we’re US deputy marshals. The dog is our K-9—police dog.”
“What business does the federal government have with us?” Mary asked, crossing her arms.

“I um, my aunt Helen suggested you might have some answers for me about my… gift. I’m an animator.”

“Givens? You’re Frances’ son then.” She made her way across the porch to him and took one of his hands in two of hers, holding it tight. She closed her eyes and Raylan felt her trying his power. This was more than the scurry of electricity across his skin; she was pushing at some of the boundaries he’d erected to keep Boyd at bay, testing them. Just when he thought he’d have to pull his hand away, she released him.

“More than an animator, I’d say,” she said. “Riding enough death magic to be a necromancer.” She watched him as she spoke. “But then you knew that already, didn’t you?”

Raylan nodded. “It’s been growing, getting more powerful.”

“Was that before or after you let a vampire lay marks on you?” Mary said.

Tim made a surprised sound, but Eunice harrumphed again.

“Vampires.” Eunice spat on the wood slats of the porch in disgust. “You know why we live up in these hills, don’t ya?”

Raylan was about to guess something about privacy when she cut him off.

“Ain’t due to not likin’ people. Work and trade be a lot easier in the holler—where’s folks can reach us without undue effort. No sir, young’un. We live up in these hills ’cause of the vampires.”

“They can fly,” Tim said. “Well, the old ones can. The younger ones drive.”

“Didn’t used to be,” she said, rocking. “Used to be they was too secretive to chance flyin’ and too set in their ways to do anythin’ so modern as drivin’ a car. Point is, days last longer on the top of the mountain than they do at the bottom.”

“I suppose there’s something to be said for having light on your side.”

“Now you’re thinking,” Mary said. She turned and walked back into the house.

“Where’s she going?” Tim asked.

“Is she coming back?” Raylan said.

The old lady tutted at them. “Expect she went to call Marianne,” Eunice said. “That child’s the only livin’ kin, aside from Helen, who has death magic. Don’t believe we had a Grant turn up necromancer in a good four generations.”

Eunice’s rheumy blue eyes seemed to clear and focus tight on Raylan, then shift to Tim and back to Raylan again. “And we never had us a male necromancer I heard of in the Grant line afore. Mary probably figures Marianne’s the only one who might know how to make a lupa out of a man.”

“A what?” Raylan asked.

Eunice either didn’t hear him or chose not to reply. She tugged the T-cork from the neck of the mash bottle again and tilted it up.

Tim huffed a half-laugh. “Huh, it’s hereditary.”
“Drinking whiskey?” Raylan asked.

“There’s that,” Tim said, waving a hand. “But I was talking about your habit of pretending not to hear questions you don’t feel like answering.”

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Marianne turned out to be Mary’s daughter. Raylan figured that made her his first cousin twice removed… or maybe his second cousin? Without a strong enough cell phone signal to get Tim to Google it for him, he had no way of telling the difference. He didn’t have a clear memory of her, growing up. When he’d come up into the hills with his mama as a kid, it hadn’t been for fun. Reunions and get-togethers of extended family from Arlo’s side or from the McKinley branch of his mama’s family meant playing with distant cousins his age. Mixing with cousins from the hills had never been an option.

He figured Marianne was close to his age, but what they had in common seemed to stop there for him. Whatever her flavor of power was, she smelled like wolf more than necromancer. She wasn’t a wolf herself—she felt human to him from the moment she’d come marching out of the woods toward them. But Raylan could smell that she’d spent a fair amount of time among wolves.

“You the animator?” she said without preamble. She glared at him as if animators were the bane of the earth.

“I am,” Raylan said. “Hardly the first in the family. My mama was one, as is my Aunt Helen.”

“I thought word was you left, got clear of Kentucky altogether.”

“I had,” Raylan said. “Had to come back on marshal business.”

“But you’re not staying around for that, now are you?” she said, the set of her face indicating she knew more than old family gossip.

“No, and maybe your mama explained that to you, but we’re hoping you can help,” Raylan said.

“Marianne Bennett,” she said. She held her hand out to Tim.

“Bennett, huh? You any relation to the Bennett County clan? Mags and her brood…” she said, cutting him off. As if on cue, two boys came barreling out of the woods up across the clearing and then up the steps.

From the fluid way they moved, Raylan knew they were wereanimals. From their scent—wolf.
“Hey Mama,” a dark-haired boy said. The taller of the two stopped and touched her shoulder while he paused to give Raylan and Tim a hard look, trying to indiscreetly scent the air. Raylan knew Tim smelled dangerous on a good day. He couldn’t imagine what the boy was picking up off of his partner.

His brother had no such concern.

“Granny! Mama said we could eat supper with you,” he yelled as he disappeared into the house. “And she said we could have dopes with it.”

“Go on in for supper, Danny,” Marianne said. “And tell David I said milk with your meal. One cup of sody pop after, if you clean yer plates.”

Danny leveled another sharp look in Raylan’s direction, then turned to disappear into the house.

“Your boys, then?” Raylan asked.

She nodded.

“I can see Doyle in them. Can’t say I knew him well. I used to play some ball with Dickie back in the day,” Raylan said. “Didn’t know any of the family married into the clan. Was actually under the impression there was some bad blood there.” She laughed at him. “Oh no, the Grants and the Bennetts go way back. It’s the Givens they hate.”

Raylan nodded his head. “Don’t expect Arlo has anything to do with that?”

“Everything,” she said. “So Mama said you came for help of some kind.” She climbed a couple steps and sat down next to Tim. She waved an offer of a seat next to her on the top step to Raylan.

He took the seat, and the three of them sat with the quiet of the hills for a moment.

“Truth is I’m more than an animator. I’m a necromancer and my power seems to be growing,” he said.

“You have a problem with it before or did it get worse when you came back to Harlan?” she asked.

Raylan spread his hands. “Hard to tell. Had a run-in with a vampire. Could be vampire influence or it just could be what my power does,” he said. “Be nice to know which and how to get it in hand.”

“What do you think?” she asked Tim.

“Me? I’m along for the ride here,” he said.

Marianne’s hand whipped out and snatched up Tim’s wrist, surprising both men and causing Sheeba to take a defensive stance, then back down. Raylan would have expected Marianne to try him, to try and test his power. But she’d picked at Tim—a curious choice. As far as he could tell, Tim was mostly a null—maybe psychic enough to know when to follow a hunch and how to use his instincts to stay alive.

Apparently Marianne didn’t disagree. “You’re more than that though,” she said.

Tim’s brows furrowed, forcing the dent between them to deepen. “I really don’t know what you’re getting at.” The light leaked from his eyes, turning the blue-gray flinty as they fell to where her hand was on his wrist, then up to her face. He didn’t have to tell her to unhand him.

She released him, while Eunice chuckled from her rocker.
“Coulda tole you not to try that one,” Eunice said.

“But you didn’t, did you Granny?” Marianne said testily over to Eunice.

Eunice laughed. “After ninety years on this hilltop, I get my fun any way I can,” Eunice said. “‘Sides whatever he’s shieldin’, boy’s got a good heart.”

Tim threw a look over his shoulder at the old woman. “You can’t know that,” he said, as if offended. Eunice just chuckled and rocked.

Raylan sighed. “Not that this isn’t fascinating, but how does this help me?”

Marianne turned to him and smiled brightly. “Don’t know yet. But s’pose you tell me how you got the taint of vampire on your aura?”

And so Raylan and Tim talked to Marianne and Eunice through the remaining light of the evening, of how Bo marked Raylan with all four vampire marks making him his human servant for less than a day. They skipped the part about how the vampire tricked Raylan into taking his blood—Raylan and Tim communicating with a glance and barely a nod to skim over that part. But, they did disclose to her Boyd Crowder put two marks on Raylan either to save his life or increase his power base.

“Probably both,” Marianne confirmed. “This is that vampire master down in Harlan with the big white church, right?”

“The same,” Raylan said. “Believes he’s saving vampires’ souls.”

Eunice guffawed. “Where God lives,” she said, slapping her thigh, “the Devil makes his rounds.”

Marianne paused for a moment to look back at the old woman, then went on. “Vampires are like bees after nectar for honey when it comes to Grants—especially those with death magic. Vampires got a yen to collect your power, then turn it into something they can feed off for evermore.”

“So how do we free Raylan of Boyd?” Tim asked.

Marianne sighed. “Don’t know that I have a good answer for that.”

Tim sighed.

“We can work on sealing you off from him—not too different from what you been doin’ to date,” Marianne said. “That’ll help some with the spillover. But there’s a bigger issue here. If you don’t learn to control your power, channel it, what is coming will only be worse than what you got now.”

“What is coming?” Raylan asked.

“Whatever your power wants to come,” Marianne said.

“What exactly does that mean?” Tim demanded.

“His necromancy… its will is to find a way to feed itself, to seek out what it needs and keep on drawing it in.”

“And when will it have all it needs?” Tim said.
Marianne didn’t answer at first.

“Marianne?” Raylan prompted.

“As long as it’s growin’ it’s gonna keep on growin’,’’ she said. “Like a body in motion stays in motion.”

“Unless something gets in the way of that motion. How do we stop it or slow it down, then?’’ Raylan asked.

“Always been our way to find something to balance death magic. One thing I can tell you, a vampire is not your answer.”

Tim and Raylan shared a long look, with Tim breaking the eye contact first to hide his face by turning his head just out of Raylan’s line of sight.

“You may be able to gain enough power with a vampire master to defeat potential enemies, but your necromancy will keep growing until you die,’’ she said.

“Joined to a vampire, I can’t die.’’

“Then, there’ll come a point when whatever your power pulls to you will overwhelm your humanity. The nature of unchecked power leads to corruption. If it doesn’t kill you, the odds are you’ll end up like the monsters you two spend your lives fighting.’’

“So, this is a curse then?’’ Raylan sighed. He pulled off his hat and carefully ran his finger around the brim, not meeting either of their gazes.

“What do you know about chemistry?’’ Marianne said, shifting the conversation.

Raylan shrugged and Tim wiggled his hand in a so-so gesture. Raylan was more of a reader and just took enough science to meet graduation requirements both in high school and college.

“Your power acts like a chemical catalyst on the vampire master/human servant relationship. It intensifies the power exchange.’’

“How so?’’ Raylan said.

“When his power increases, so does yours exponentially—that might explain what you were telling me about the visions of him blood-oathing followed by your power surges. We can work on building up ways to block Crowder until we find a way to break the marks that bind you.’’

“What breaks the binds?’’ Tim asked.

“Death. That is the only thing I ever heard of,’’ Marianne said. “It’s why Grants try so hard to not fall under a vampire’s power.’’

“That would have been good information to have,’’ Raylan said. “Why didn’t Mama or Helen know that?’’

Marianne sighed. “They didn’t need to know, I expect. We keep our family’s secrets close to the hills. Maybe Aunt Frances and Aunt Helen weren’t powerful enough to bother with. An animator’s power ain’t nothing next to a necromancer. And both those girls got away from hill life for their own reasons, I expect.”

“I’ve been running after vampires for twenty years. Someone could have told me this was a risk,’’
“Maybe they thought you were scary enough that none of the vampires would mess with you,” she said. “Or they didn’t know how powerful you really were.”

“But you know all of this. How did you keep from becoming vampire bait?” Tim asked.

“Like I said, powerful death magic can be like a chemical catalyst. Those of us with that line of the gift look for something that’ll bond with our magic and counteract its catalytic nature... like an inhibitor—that keeps other things, like vampires, from marking us and bonding with our power.”

“What’s the magic-user version of a chemical inhibitor?” Tim asked.

“A magic that is more alive in nature, warms the cold nature of death magic,” she said. “Like an alkali reacts to an acid. Creates a balance.”

“What do you mean by magic that’s alive?” Raylan said.

“Well, Grants always been joined with the lycanthrope community. Goin’ back… used to be arranged marriages between the local pack leaders and a Grant who presented with the gift,” Marianne said.

“And the Bennetts?” Raylan asked though he was pretty sure he didn’t have to. She still smelled heavily of wolf. He hadn’t known Mags Bennett and her brood were werewolves.

“Doyle. He’s the Bennett County pack Ulfric—their king,” Marianne said. “I’m his lupa. His mate.”

“And you want me to be a lupa?” Raylan asked.

“Ain’t never met no man who could be a woman,” Eunice tsked, before pushing herself out of her rocker and letting the screen door slam behind her.

Tim spread his hands out in front of him in silent question.

Marianne just shrugged and Raylan winced. “Maybe she’s drunk?” he said.

“So modern medicine made it up the hill,” Tim said, “but not the concept of gender fluidity, huh?”

“We’re a simple people,” Marianne offered.

Raylan huffed. “Bullshit.”

***

Raylan sat across from Marianne on the weedy grass of an old family plot, feeling her pressing her power at him. She was cross-legged with her palms resting upwards on her knees while he stretched his long legs out before him. He was leaning against the weathered gravestone of an old Grant relative he bet no one even remembered.

The little cemetery, corralled by a graying split-rail fence, was well-kept for what it was—given his family’s inclination toward cremation. He’d expected to see the plots that dated back into the 1800s to be overgrown and untended. But Raylan figured keeping the land hallowed and whole fell in line with the family business. When a cemetery’s consecration wore thin from disuse or foul play like black magic, it became fodder for ghoul infestations.

And no one liked a ghoul infestation.
Raylan watched Tim stalk off back in the direction of Mary’s to get some sleep. The cemetery wasn’t all that far from her house—which he guessed she’d inherited from Eunice. Tim’d wanted to leave Sheeba with Raylan, but Marianne had shooed him off as soon as they started to get out her ritual objects.

“You mute them,” she told Tim. “And who knows how that hound is gonna relate with the dead. She’s just ‘other’ enough for it to go poorly.”

When Tim had asked her who exactly he was silencing, she just mumbled something about how the spirits didn’t like him. Raylan had stretched out his mind after she said that, feeling for ghosts and found nothing awry with the old Grant plots. Usually he just ignored ghosts. When he paid them any attention, they’d cling and grab at him.

“We need to draw a circle,” Marianne told him, standing up from her meditative position. She handed him an old dagger, handle first. “Watch out, it’s sharp.”

Raylan wrapped his hand around what looked like a bone handle with a Celtic knot carved into it. He touched it with his necromancy and knew the handle was old and antler and the knife was seasoned by generations of ritual magic of no particular flavor. A buck didn’t die to make the knife, but at least two centuries had passed since he’d walked the hills where he sloughed off his rack.

“A dirk?” he asked.

“No. A sgian dubh,” Marianne said, her accent tightening syllables in the first word and stretching out the second to sound a bit like “ski ‘n doo.”

“Had it a long time?” He couldn’t resist testing her to see if she would lie to him.

“I’d say. Family heirloom goin’ way back,” she replied.

Raylan nodded, then looked around. “Do you have chickens or something we can sacrifice for the blood for the circle?”

She looked at him evenly. “Why do you need a chicken?”

“Because the protective circle needs sacrificial blood.”

“What’s wrong with your blood?” she asked.

“I… nothing. Just… I don’t think that will work.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because my mama taught me to use chickens. And all animators I know use them.” The poultry industry had actually been pretty supportive of the animators becoming licensed.

“If chicken blood, wouldn’t other blood work?”

“Of course. Sacrificed larger animals to raise older zombies more times than I can count. A client provided a cow earlier this month.”

“Big sacrifice. How’d that work out for you?”

“Poorly.”

“What would you say if I told you the blood sacrifice works because you believe it will work?” she
asked, pausing for a reply. When Raylan didn’t say anything, she finished her thought. “If you believe your blood will work, it will.”

He shook his head. “I don’t have enough blood to draw a wide enough circle to protect myself and a zombie from anything that wanted in.”

“You don’t need but a few drops. Remember the size of the sacrifice… a chicken is a small sacrifice, but so are a few drops of your blood—and you don’t have to take a life for it.”

“Go on,” he said.

“As a necromancer, your blood is powerful. A few drops of your blood is a sacrifice that is at least on par with the sacrifice of a living being, even if it is a chicken.”

“Huh. I never thought of it that way,” Raylan said. “That makes sense, I just don’t see how you’re going to cover a circle with a drop or two of blood.”

“I’m not. You are. With your mind. You cut your arm in sacrifice—the top of your arm will be fine, you walk the circle letting the blood fall from the knife, and the circle is created when you will it into place.”

“All right,” Raylan said, sounding dubious at best.

“What are you afraid of? Bound to that vampire, you’ll heal in no time.”

“That’s true,” Raylan muttered. He’d cut himself shaving a week before and because he shared two marks with Boyd, the cut had healed over in less than a day. “How big a circle do we want? What are we raising?”

“Oh, just the space of a grave or two around the two of us,” she said, moving to stand between a couple of headstones. “We’re not raising anything. Tonight, anyway.”

Raylan nodded and sliced the top of his forearm and felt the power of the sacrifice building as he started to scrape along the skin on his forearm to gather his blood on the knife’s blade. He walked in a circle around Marianne dripping blood every few steps while he pictured the energy of the circle in the wake of his footsteps. When he closed it, he felt relief in the satisfying snap of his power closing the circle. He always thought a power circle opening and closing felt like his ears popping mid-flight after an altitude change.

With the circle in place, he turned to face her. “So what are we conjuring that we needed the circle for?”

“Dead. Not zombies though,” she said, sitting down again on the ground and crossing her legs. She gestured for him to join her.

Raylan settled in front of her resting his arms on his knees bent in front him.

“So what are we doing?”

“I’m going to call some spirits to ‘heal’ over the weak places the vampire’s marks inflicted on your shield. It won’t break the marks, but if it works like I think it will, they might be able to do the metaphysical version of spackling over the dents the marks put in your magic.”

Marianne scooted closer to him so her knees were touching his boots. She took the knife Raylan had used and slid the edge across her palm.
Raylan winced at the co-mingling their blood. She pressed her palms together and chanted in a way that wasn’t unlike how Raylan called the dead from the ground. He felt power emanating from her like heat rolling off a fire.

She leaned forward and flattened her palms to either side of his face.

“What’re you doing?” Raylan asked, grabbing her by the forearms, prepared to pry her off him.

“Calling the Munin,” she said. “Don’t fight them. Let them roll through you. They’ll shore up the weak places in your shields as best they can.”

Raylan forced himself to relax and he smelled wolf. Lots of wolf. Marianne still had his face in her hands, her blood hot on his cheeks as wave after wave of the dead washed through him. It felt more cloying than any ghost he’d ever tangled with. Ghosts clung like cobwebs. These dead… spirits rode him and rolled around his power: they liked his necromancy. Instinctively, he wanted to command them. He was necromancer; they were the dead, and thereby his to command.

“Don’t fight them,” Marianne ordered.

“What are they?” Raylan bit out.

“Lukoi. Memories of the dead and gone,” she said.

“Why do I smell wolves?”

“Lukoi are wolves.”

Raylan felt his eyes roll back in his head before he passed out.

He came to with Tim lightly smacking his cheek.

“I said leave him alone,” Marianne said. “He’ll come around when he is ready. Don’t wanna rush it.”

“The hell?” Raylan murmured. The wolf spirits were gone and he felt drained. “Tim?”

“How did your mate cross your power circle?” Marianne asked.

Raylan pushed himself up onto his elbows. “Thought you were sleepin’,” Raylan said.

“Sheeba woke me.” Tim leveled a cold stare in Marianne’s direction. “Good thing, too. Are you hurt? What’s bleeding?”

Raylan touched the blood on his face. Some of it was dry enough to flake away. But it felt tacky, so he couldn’t have been out too long. “Nothing. Not my blood,” he said. “What happened to the wolf ghosts?” Raylan asked Marianne.

“They finished their job,” she said. “Hopefully you’ll have a better time keeping Crowder at bay. For a while anyway.”

Tim’s eyebrows popped up and his shoulders loosened with that news.

“Thanks,” Raylan replied.

“Now, your mate. How is it he is inside your power circle?”

Raylan sat up. Tim crossed the circle when he’d raised Bowman Crowder a few months back. “No
big deal. He’s not a null, but he’s pretty damned close. Not enough psychic energy on board for the circle to bother barring him.”

Marianne’s eyes were narrowed at him. “I agree with that much of what you just said, he’s not a psychic null.”

“What are you suggesting?” Tim asked, an edge in his voice that Raylan recognized as impatience.

“I just know you are more than nothing,” Marianne answered. “The munin grew silent around you.”

“What the hell are munin?”

“Wolf ghosts, I think,” Raylan said. “She can call them.”

“Huh,” Tim said. “I grew up in state with varmint laws on the books, bounty hunting at my father’s knee. If I were a lycanthrope ghost, I wouldn’t talk to me either.”

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, commenting, following, and for hanging in there.
Chapter 8

Thank-you out to Jonjo for beta-reading and letting me bounce pacing and plot questions against her careful and agile mind. Her input is invaluable to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tim and Raylan didn’t pull up to Ava Crowder’s seized house until midday Monday.

Marianne had convinced Raylan to extend their weekend arguing that he needed to work with her to “expand his preconceived notions about his craft.” As far as Tim could tell, that meant doing with the dead during the day what Raylan always told him could only be done at night. So Tim shadowed his partner as he wandered around mountaintop graves trying to “feel” the dead in the light of day.

He and Sheeba sat at the base of a tree in the little cemetery near Eunice’s house watching them for the better part of Sunday morning instead of hiking back to his truck.

“Let’s start with trying to feel the dead,” Marianne had instructed Raylan. “We’ll try actually raising a zombie in the daylight later.”

“That’s impossible,” Raylan said.

“Why?”

“Just is. You need the night to raise the dead.”

“But why?”

“Always been that way.”

“You mean, it’s always been that way for you,” Marianne chided.

“I… yeah. I guess Mama taught me this was how it worked. Gotta have the cover of darkness to raise a zombie. Everything’s always pointed to that being true. Roadkill never follows me during the day.”

“But zombies walk during the day, don’t they?” Marianne reminded him.

“If they’ve already been raised over a night.”

“And you can put them to rest during the day?”

“Sometimes.” Raylan thought back. “Well, it’s more that I can control them. Always just waited for nightfall to lay them to rest.”

“And if I told you that your power is strong enough to make other ways possible?”

Raylan hadn’t looked like he believed her.

“They walk during the day, you can control them during the day…. How come you can’t raise
them?” Marianne reasoned.

“Because I can’t. It just don’t work that way.”

Sunday had turned into a long afternoon.

Tim trailed after Raylan stopping at various places where there were grave stones marking Raylan’s passed kin, while Raylan answered questions from Marianne like “How long has this body been interred?”

Meanwhile, Tim lazily ran Sheeba through training exercises, practicing basic commands treating it like a form of meditation. It settled a restlessness in him and his approval made Sheeba wiggle when he’d give her the command to break rank.

They ended up sleeping another night in a single bed in Eunice’s old house and started back at first light Monday morning.

By the time Raylan and Tim hiked down the mountain and got back to the house, Rachel was waiting outside with another marshal, sitting in Raylan’s car with the windows down even though the sun was only just beginning to warm the cool fall day.

“You’re early,” Raylan said. “We didn’t expect you until closer to nightfall.”

“Why should you two have all the fun?” Rachel said, climbing out of the car. The closer she got to Raylan, she scrunched up her nose. “You smell.”

Tim bit back a laugh. Raylan did stink, and Tim probably smelled just as bad. After two days traipsing around the woods followed by nights pressed together, Tim had stopped noticing. The god-awful animator’s salve that Marianne and Raylan kept smearing on themselves as they played with the dead only made it worse; they both probably smelled like rotten Italian sausage.

“Why are you so early?” Tim asked, narrowing his eyes at Rachel.

“Why don’t we go on in?” she said. “I think this’ll go better if you two get cleaned up before Vasquez finds his way over here.”

“You brought Vasquez?” Raylan said, sounding shocked.

“Yes, and Deputy Marshal Clive Perry here. From asset management.”

Tim shuddered. Asset management was like his personal nightmare. He didn’t have a problem with the thoroughness and detail work involved in inventorying and selling off criminals’ assets. He even appreciated that the ill-gotten gains would eventually benefit victims. But the bean-counting bored him.

“Uh, bean-counters,” he muttered.

Rachel shot him a look of disapproval.

The other marshal got out of the car and cleared his throat. “Hey.” Perry, an older man smartly dressed in a suit and tie, waved and smiled at them. Tim thought he looked like an accountant, from top of his short tapered afro past his conservative tie to his shiny black wingtips.

Raylan nodded at the man. “Why is Vasquez in Harlan?”
Rachel sighed. “He’s getting an informant settled in.”

Raylan narrowed his eyes at Rachel and she finally shrugged.

“You’re not going to like it.”

“I’m getting that idea already.”

“Arlo finally turned over some info of value to the AUSA’s office.”

“Oh shit no,” Raylan said, rubbing his hand over his face. “Tell me Vasquez didn’t cut a deal with Arlo.”

Rachel pressed her lips together. “I’m sorry.”

“He kidnapped his son. A federal marshal.” Tim gritted the words out.

“I know,” Rachel said, her face grim. “You both know I know what you’re feeling.”

Raylan rolled his eyes and grabbed Tim by the elbow.

Tim wanted to resist but if Raylan wasn’t protesting Arlo’s deal, how could he? “Sheeba, perimeter,” Tim ordered over his shoulder. She took off to run the property.

“C’mon Tim. Shower,” Raylan said.

His partner tugged him toward front door. “Rach, when Sheeba gets back, can you let her in?” Tim called back to her.

When they got to the stairs inside, Raylan sent Tim up ahead of him.

“I can’t believe you’re not pissed…” Tim started.

“Hush. You know I am. But he’s Arlo. He won’t be free long. He never is,” Raylan said, resigned. “Shower now. Go. I’ll join you in a few.”

Tim paused halfway up the steps when he heard the ringing ping of water hitting the metal of Sheeba’s bowl, followed by the sound of the freezer door opening, then the microwave buzzing. He was still pissed about Arlo but couldn’t help smiling to himself as he heard Raylan prepping his dog’s food. He just wished he understood why Raylan could be so nonplussed about Arlo making a deal for his freedom.

Tim’s mood didn’t get any better when Vasquez arrived.

Part of Arlo’s information was the location of a unit at a local storage company used by Bo that few in his organization knew about. Arlo reported to the marshals service Bo kept paperwork from his business ventures there—legitimate and otherwise. Paper trail evidence had been something Vasquez had been jonesing hard ever since Boyd tipped them off about his father’s connections to other vampire masters. Vasquez was sure they were onto the existence of a preternatural syndicate.

Further, Arlo was willing to testify that Bo gave Boyd the money he used to start his church. Raylan doubted the veracity of the second claim, but a team of marshals had been clearing out the storage unit all afternoon. The reports were the documents looked promising. Vasquez was convinced he’d find something to build the first preternatural RICO case. He’d been pushing them to collect as much of the evidence left in the wake of Bo’s death, certain it would expose other vampires the marshals service thought were involved in a nationwide network trafficking network of blackmarket goods.
and preternatural beings like web Nahtoo and the harpies had been caught up in.

Buoyed by the boxes of documents they’d pulled from the storage unit, Vasquez insisted they move to seize Boyd’s church before nightfall—against Raylan’s and Tim’s advice.

“Do you really think we’re going to find anything there related to organized crime?” Raylan asked.

Vasquez just shrugged as if it didn’t matter.

Tim agreed with Raylan. He figured the real reason they were claiming the church was to put the slowdown on Boyd’s climb to power. Taking away his funding base and method of gathering his flock would certainly do that.

Raylan then argued it would put Boyd and his people on the defensive if they seized his church while he was still sleeping.

“Do we know that’s his daytime resting place?” Rachel asked.

Tim scowled.

“No,” Raylan admitted.

“Then what’s the problem?” Vasquez demanded.

Vasquez argued that if they waited until the master vampire was awake and knew they were seizing his property, he might have the opportunity to do away with some evidence left over from Bo’s reign.

“If there’s something untoward there for us to find, I highly doubt that evidence against Bo would be Boyd’s first priority,” Raylan argued to deaf ears.

***

Tim and Raylan found Dewey Crowe manning the empty church that afternoon with the same human male they’d encountered Friday night.


Word of Jack Benchley’s death must have gotten around because the church parishioner whispered, “Mister Crowe, Master Boyd was firm the other night on how we need to work with the marshals.”

“What was your name, kid?” Raylan asked.

“Chris Lytle.”

“Word about Benchley’s demise made the rounds here then?” Raylan asked as if he didn’t already know.

Chris’s eyes darted between Dewey, Raylan, and Tim. “Boyd was very clear.”

“Good to see you’re hale and healthy, Dewey,” Raylan said. “You and Boyd still getting on these days.”

“And why wouldn’t we? Boyd takes care of whatever Dewey Crowe needs,” Dewey said.

“And I bet you do the same for him, don’t you?” Tim commented and caught Raylan’s eye.
Raylan nodded minutely. Boyd had rolled Dewey hard the night Bo was killed. Raylan wasn’t sure he’d ever completely get his free will back. He was, in essence, a “bride”—a term handed down through fiction and vampire lore. Chances were good Dewey was now like one of “Dracula’s brides.” His motivation in life was now to serve Boyd first—whatever Boyd wanted or needed.

“What? The marshals come to see if me ’n Boyd are gettin’ along? I don’t think Boyd’d be real happy with y’all nosin’ around when he ain’t even up and about yet.”

“Been south lately to see your kin, Dewey?” Raylan asked.

“I couldn’t leave Boyd. He needs me to help him get his church running.”

Raylan nodded and Tim pressed his lips together.

“Well, see Dewey, that’s what we’re here to talk to you all about,” Raylan said. “This here is Assistant US Attorney David Vasquez and he’s got a writ of forfeiture for The Modern Eternal Life Church—this building and all its contents.”

“You’re takin’ the church?” Dewey asked incredulously.

Chris literally wrang his hands.

Raylan pursed his lips and nodded. “Looks like it.”

“Boyd’s not gonna like this,” Dewey said, getting agitated. “Not at all.”

He started breathing faster and faster.

“Is he going to hyperventilate?” Vasquez asked.

“Might just. We might want to call an ambulance in,” Raylan said.

“C’mon Dewey, let’s get some fresh air,” Tim said, leading Dewey from the room.

Chris stepped forward and asked to see the writ. Vasquez handed it over to him.

“Can you even do this? This is a church for God’s sakes,” he said more to himself than the marshals and ADA filling his boss’s office.

“God doesn’t have a lot to do with it,” Rachel muttered.

“Still,” Chris countered. “It’s not the federal government’s role to dictate the nature of a church.”

“I assure you we can and have done this,” Vasquez said.

“Don’t supposed Boyd is around?” Raylan asked.

Chris scowled. “You know I wouldn’t tell you that—even if I knew where Master Boyd’s daytime resting place was.”

Tim slipped back into the room.

“Dewey?” Rachel asked.

“Got his head between his knees with one of the county sheriff deputies keeping watch. EMT truck on its way,” Tim replied.
“I need to call Master Boyd and Ms. Vespucci’s law office.”

“Boyd’s awake?” Raylan asked, shocked. It was late afternoon. He’d realized Boyd had accumulated a lot of power quickly, but for the master vampire to be awake even in the early afternoon indicated he had more power than Raylan realized.

Chris winced at Raylan’s question and didn’t reply, understanding the gaffe he’d stumbled into.

“I assure you that everything is in order, Mr. Lytle,” Vasquez said, oblivious to what passed between Raylan and Boyd’s parishioner.

“We’re going to need you to leave the premises. Are there other employees of the church on the grounds?” Rachel asked.

“I don’t…. no. Not at this time,” he said. “Just Dewey and myself.”

“Are you sure about that?” Rachel said, her eyes narrowed.

His eyes tracked between Raylan, Tim, and Rachel. “I… some of the pack are in editing. They work on their own projects during the day when all the church productions are finished.”

“Pack?” Raylan asked.

“Wolf?” Tim said.

Chris nodded.

Raylan’s eyes met Tim’s.

“Clive, go ahead and start with Vasquez in the office. We’re going to clear the rest of the church. Rachel?” Raylan said.

She smiled. “Thought you’d never ask.”

Raylan moved through the church with Tim, Rachel and Sheeba clearing bathrooms, confessionals —what did Boyd need confessionals for—Raylan wondered. The building even had a reception area and a kitchen. He wondered what vampires made in that kitchen. After moving through all the rooms, they came up empty.

“Where the hell is the editing room?” Tim asked.

“Not in the AV area,” Rachel said, pointing to the area where an unmanned camera and a soundboard was set up.

“Wait. Wasn’t there one of those little trailers—what are they called? Portables? Back behind the church when we burned Benchely?” Tim asked.

Raylan’s eyes lit up. “That’s right.”

Standing outside the back of the church in the fading light of the day, they measured up how to approach the trailer that looked more like an antique fifth wheel than a portable now that they were sizing it up.

“If they’re wolves, they’re gonna hear you coming,” Rachel said.
“Maybe,” Tim said.

“Probably,” Raylan countered.

“Okay, this is how it’s going to go. Sheeba and I go in first and then Raylan can follow. Rachel—you watch the back to make sure no one comes out a window. You have silver ammo now, right?”

“Is this some preternatural marshal closing ranks thing?” Rachel asked.

Tim’s brows furrowed deepening the indentation between them in confusion. “No. I’ve just been hunting were-wolves since I was a kid. And this is what Sheeba was trained for."

Tim banged on the door.

“US Marshals, open up.”

He heard scrambling and a crash. When he tried the door again, the screech of metal rending apart masked the sounds of Tim’s fist beating the door.

“US Marshals, hands up,” Rachel yelled.

“I’ll back her up,” Raylan said, taking off around the corner of the camper.

“Shit,” Tim said, trying the trailer’s door to find it locked, then shooting rounds into knob and yanking it open. “Sheeba. Go. Search. Wolf.” The fur around her neck and her course dorsal mane stood up as she shot through the door growling. Tim followed with his glock drawn.

He’d no more than cleared the steps and hadn’t completed a full clock of the space, when he heard whimpering that wasn’t coming from his dog.

“Oh my god, get it off me, help.”

Confident that Sheeba had her quarry in hand, he finished his visual sweep of the fifth wheel camper. It’s was older—nothing as fancy as the RV vampire Wynn Duffy lived in. This was one big room, filled with computer equipment and several large monitors. There was a small sink and microwave and it looked like a bed in the storage area at the front. A hole was torn into the back wall where someone had clawed a do-it-yourself quick get-away. He could hear Raylan and Rachel reading those someones his rights.

Tim finally turned to where Sheeba had the man cornered. He guessed the guy was human, but he wasn’t taking any chances.

“Sheeba, down. Guard.” She stopped growling and sat on her haunches in front of the man. Tim made his way over and dug the fingers of his free hand into the hair on her neck. “Good girl, but I thought I told you to find a wolf.” She didn’t respond. Tim shook his head. Great, even his dog didn’t appreciate his humor.

“I’m not a wolf,” the man said, meeting Tim’s gaze with honest-to-god violet eyes. Tim had never seen the like. “I’m a cat, if you must know. I work for Master Boyd.” He waved at the computers. “Video production for his syndicated sermons. And what, may I ask, is that beast?”

“She’s a Trollhound,” Tim answered defensively.

“Wow. Impressive,” the cat said. Tim wondered what kind of werekitty had purple eyes.
“All right, stand up slowly. Sheeba, relax. Back off.” The Trollhound stood up and backed away.

When Violet Eyes stood, he was lanky and much taller than Tim. “Hands up where I can see them, then face the wall. Got any ID?”

“Not on me,” Violet Eyes looked down at a pair of loose flannel pajama pants and a T-shirt. “My wallet was over by the monitors before the wolves ripped through the wall.”

Tim frisked him, knocking a long braid out of his way that ran the length of the cat’s back—looking for anything that could be used as a weapon. Tim even checked the braid for a blade. The guy actually giggled when Tim reached his thighs.

“Sheeba, guard.” She stood at attention in front of his suspect while Tim surveyed the workstation for the guy’s wallet.

Finding it, he pulled out a Kentucky driver’s license. “Nathaniel Graison?”

Nathaniel smiled at Tim and winked. “In the flesh.” When Tim didn’t respond to his flirting, Nathaniel cleared his throat as if he was getting serious. “What’s this about?” he asked.

“The US Marshal’s service is seizing Boyd Crowder’s church and its assets.”

Nathaniel looked confused. “Because of the pack’s porn sideline? Sure, it’s sleazy, but it’s not illegal.”

“What porn sideline are you talking about?” Tim asked.

“Um… nothing?”

“Sure. Well, we have time to get into that later.”

“There’s um… one other thing. All this…” Nathaniel ran his finger in a circle in the air pointing to everything in the trailer. “None of this here could technically be viewed as Boyd Crowder’s assets. I’m a contract employee. This is my trailer. That’s my equipment.”

“It’s on Boyd Crowder’s property.”

“He rents it to me. Doesn’t even give me a discount, even though I manage the church website and produce all his televangelism vids.”

“Shit. All right, let’s get the lawyers to straighten this out.”

***

Outside the trailer, Rachel and Raylan perp-walked the two wolves who’d escaped out the back around to the front.

“You’re not going to lock me up too, Marshal?” Nathaniel asked Tim, pouting.

Stone-faced, Tim didn’t reply, but just handed him his wallet.

“I can smell that you want to,” Nathaniel whispered.

Raylan’s eyes landed on his partner. Tim could have sworn he saw Raylan lift his nose into the air; he was sure he saw his nostrils flare. “I can, too,” Raylan said.
Tim crossed his arms and set his jaw.

Nathaniel’s attention shifted to Raylan. “And who are you?” Nathaniel breathed in a moment. “Better yet, what are you? You smell of wolf, but you’re not, are you? Definitely human. Yet you can scent how good Marshal Hottie smells.”

Tim rubbed his forehead.

Raylan stared at Nathaniel as if taking his measure. “Wereleopard?”

“Very good,” he said, then lowered his voice to a whisper as he took a long look at Raylan. “Lord, they don’t bother hiring ugly marshals around these parts, do they?”

Raylan ignored him. “Tim, what’s this guy’s story?”

“Says he owns the trailer and runs video production for Boyd and the wolves… seems the pack has a sideline business of the triple-X variety,” Tim said.

The wolf with Rachel cursed. “Fucking cat! You told them? Devil’s gonna kill you if Boyd doesn’t first.”

Tim glanced between Nathaniel and Rachel’s prisoner. “Boyd charges him rent. Not sure the writ to seize the church covers the trailer. And he says the porn site is legal.”

“Porn site?” Rachel asked.

Nathaniel and the two wolves stared at each other for a moment, then the wolf in Raylan’s cuffs nodded.

“Harlan unemployment is pretty high in the local lycan community,” Nathaniel explained. “There used to be some mine work under Bo’s reign, but those jobs were few and far between and went to vamps first. It’s forced the local groups to… branch out. Bo used to force them into filming at first—but there’s a lucrative market for shifter adult entertainment. All before my time,” Nathaniel said, holding out his hands. “I’m all about consensual profit. Now that Boyd’s in charge… let’s just say adult entertainment doesn’t intersect well with his church’s mission, but the local were groups still need to work. The entertainment industry for tourists is all about vampires. A cat’s got to make a livin’.”

“You’re in these films?” Tim asked, unable to help himself from asking the question.

Raylan squinted his eyes at his lover.

Nathaniel laughed. “Why Marshal, I’ll send you a guest login to our site if you think it’ll get your rocks off.”

Tim shook his head.

“Well, maybe your partner then?” Nathaniel offered, his eyes running up the length of Raylan.

“Sure, I’ll take that password,” Rachel said. “We’ll need to make sure this actually is legal.”

“I run production and the website,” he replied, then he indignantly continued. “I run a clean shop.”

They were just about to head back over to the church to find Vasquez when they heard a voice call
out through the darkness.

“Raylan Givens, are you out there?”

“Guess Boyd’s awake,” Raylan said.

Tim looked over at Raylan surprised, but Raylan didn’t seem to catch Tim’s shock that Boyd didn’t already know Raylan was within shouting distance. Maybe whatever Marianne had done with the wolf munin did create a block between the master vampire and his human servant.

They turned as a group and watched the vampire stalk toward them.

“Are you seriously going to take my church?” Boyd asked. “After all we been through together?”

“It’s out of my hands, Boyd,” Raylan said. “We got a tip that Bo’s ill-gotten gains funded it. The US Attorney’s office feels like those assets belong with crime victims more than they belong with you.”

“Raylan.” Boyd showed a bit of fang as his attempt at appeal stretched out the syllables in the name. “I thought we’d come to an understanding.”

“And what understanding was that Mr. Crowder?” Rachel asked, her voice deceptively sweet, but her eyes tracked the interaction between Boyd and Raylan.

Raylan looked uncertain and Tim was sure that Rachel was picking up that emotion off him. She didn’t know Boyd made Raylan his human servant to save him the night Raylan killed Bo. None of the marshals besides he and Raylan knew. Tim wasn’t even sure Boyd had shared that information with the vampires in his organization since it sure had been a surprise to Ava Crowder when they’d graced them with a visit the week before.

Fortunately, Boyd was no fool.

“Well, as you might have heard, we had an unfortunate incident in town with one of the local vampires and I took care of that within our organization,” Boyd explained, his big white teeth and fangs were somehow shiny in the darkness.

“You mean you shot and killed a vampire in cold blood?” Rachel countered.

“I took care of a vampire who was blood-oathed to me and my church, as is my responsibility as the local vampire master. Are the marshals interfering in vampire politics now?” Boyd asked.

“No, we’re not,” Raylan said, shooting Rachel a stern look. “The seizure is connected with Bo’s money and nothing else Boyd. If you got a problem with it, take it up with the US attorney’s office.”

***

Rachel, Tim, and Raylan delivered the wolves and Nathaniel into the custody of a Harlan County sheriff’s deputy and stood guard with Sheeba out front of the church. Vasquez was summoned into the sheriff’s office to meet with Nathaniel’s attorney to determine if they could seize his trailer and its contents or not.

Clive worked with the team who’d packed up Bo’s storage unit that afternoon inside the church boxing up documents and paperwork from Boyd’s office. There must not have been much to gather because less than a half hour passed before they loaded out their evidence.

“We went through that church,” Raylan said. “There’s nothing there to seize except the building and
maybe the AV equipment.”

“Vasquez’s sure he’s gonna score a preternatural RICO case,” Rachel said, shrugging. “It would make his career.”

Tim shook his head.

“So what are you two hiding from me?” Rachel asked, her tone idle like she was pondering aloud if it would rain the next day.

Raylan’s attention shot to her. “I don’t know what you mean,” he said.

Her gaze sharpened and she pointed at him. “See, right there. You know exactly what I mean.”

Tim squared his jaw and concentrated on nothing.

“You need to take a lesson from this one—” Rachel pointed her thumb in Tim’s direction “—he’s locked down tight. He’s either hiding something or fantasizing about that little cat shifter who the sheriff hauled off.”

“Hey! I’m not—”

“Into the cat shifter, I know,” she said. “But you are hiding something.”

Tim and Raylan both folded their arms across their chests.

“Look at the pair of you,” she said, pointing at them again. “I don’t know who’s copying who and who is covering for the other. I’m telling Art you two spend too much damned time together.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Raylan said. “I’m not going back to Lexington this week.”

“You’re not?” Tim asked, surprised.

“It’s animator shit, Rachel,” Raylan said. “I’m having trouble with my power.”

Tim knew the answer was honest and would therefore appease her. For now, anyway.

She nodded, her eyes bright and satisfied.

“You can go on back with Tim in his truck and I’ll keep the Town Car. I’m going to stick around and work with some kin who have some expertise with the dead. I can play backup to Clive the bean-counter if he needs it. I think he’s got plans to audit Bo’s vampire tourist traps next week to get them ready for auction since Halloween’ll be over,” Raylan said.

“That’s right, it’s Halloween, isn’t it?” Rachel said.

“Hm-mmm,” Raylan said. “Not sure I like the odds of Clive auditing the vampire zipline tour on his own. If it gets a little airish, pretty sure he’d blow right off the mountaintop.”

***

Tim missed Raylan.

It wasn’t something he was used to. He’d been separated from Pete when they were together more times than not—and he’d never felt this ache. He did his best to bury it when he was around Rachel. Since she tried to pin Raylan and him down in Harlan over what they were hiding, he guarded
himself around her. Or avoided the empathic marshal altogether.

There was nothing wrong with her knowing he missed his partner but the threat she’d made about telling Art they spent too much time together was like a shot across his bow, raising his hackles.

Over the week, Tim took any job that pulled him out of the office—even some non-preternatural marshal duties. At home though, the missing crept up on him. The house was never exactly quiet or lonesome, but it had a void. Sheeba was a solid presence—toenails tapping on the wood flooring—and a solid presence curled up beside him at night. But she wasn’t Raylan and she didn’t fill that void that Tim found more difficult to ignore at the week passed.

Worse, when Raylan called Wednesday, he reported that his training wasn’t going well with Marianne. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t raise a zombie during the day. He’d told Tim that he thought he’d be back closer to the weekend.

On Friday, Tim took Nelson’s prisoner transport duty so the other marshal could go to his kid’s middle-school basketball game, but the real reason was to put some distance between Rachel and himself. When he swung back through the office late Friday afternoon to return the transport van and pick up his truck, Art stopped by his desk.

“You know Winona right? Raylan’s ex?”

Tim’s brow furrowed. “Sure. Met her when we got that warrant on Emmitt Arnett.”

“Whose murder case is still open,” Art reminded him grumpily.

“I think Raylan’s working on it.”

“S’pose one of you’ll let me know if anything comes of that?”

“First name on our list,” Tim affirmed, folding his arms across his chest.

Art leveled a hard look at Tim before he went on. “Sure you will. Listen. About Winona, she’s been in here every day for… a good week and a half now,” the chief said.

“This about Duffy or Arnett, you think?” Tim asked sharply.

“Don’t think so. Looking for Raylan, she says, and won’t take any help from me. This morning though, when she asked if Raylan was around, then she asked for you. Said she’d take whoever showed up first.”

“Me?” Tim pushed back his chair. “What’s she want with me?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Art said. “She said you could find her in her office. Third floor, name’s on the door, I think.” Art pressed the sticky edge of a Post-It flat to Tim’s desktop. “But there’s the office number in case you get lost.”

Tim squinted his eyes at Art.

“Thanks, I think.”

Freed of the Post-it, Art stood up and buried his hands deep in the pockets of his tan Dockers. “Better you than me.”

Tim found the door with “Winona Hawkins” stenciled across the glass and knocked. He was hoping that this late on a Friday afternoon she’d already be gone.
Luck was not on his side.

The door opened. “Oh thank God. Tim, right? Raylan’s Tim?”

Her hectic manner threw him off. “Um. Sure. I’m his partner,” Tim answered slowly, hoping to settle her down.

“Is that what you’re calling it?” she asked.

Tim ignored her question. “Art said you wanted to see me.”

She waved him into her office and pushed the door shut behind him.

Out of habit, his eyes swept the room. The door had “Court Reporter” stenciled under her name, but the office was in shambles, looking more like a hotel room than a place of business. The couch had a blanket thrown across it and a bed pillow at the end—complete with the impression of a head. It was Tim’s guess, she was sleeping in her office. Boxes and multiple suitcases were shoved to the sides of the room and her desk looked more like a vanity table than anything remotely professional.

“Are you living here?” Tim asked. “Gary throw you out?”

Which apparently was the wrong thing to say.

Her mouth fell partially open.

“Oh my God! You think fucking Raylan gives you the right to judge me? You don’t know anything about me.”

“I—”

“Where’s Raylan?”

“He’s on assignment,” Tim answered. He started circling the room, taking in the extent of the personal belongings she’d squirreled away in her office.

“Why in the hell isn’t he answering his phone?”

“My guess would be he doesn’t want to talk to you,” Tim said, then turned his attention on her. “I’m beginning to see why.”

Her resolve and anger waned as tears welled up. She collapsed to the couch and buried her face in her hands, starting to cry.

As the crying became sobs, Tim took a deep breath and moved over to her. He shoved the blanket aside and sank down next to her.

“Hey,” he said, settling a palm on her back. “Can you tell me why you’re looking for Raylan?”

Silence and hiccups replaced the sobs as she tried settling herself with a few deep breaths.

“Sorry. It’s just the pregnancy hormones.”

“Really... you’re...” This was way outside his area of expertise.

She nodded. “Pregnant.”
“Oh shit. Have you been to a… doctor? Did they check for Vlad syndrome?” Tim asked. He didn’t know much about pregnancy or even women in general—but he did know about vampires. And when vampires—typically newly dead male vampires who often still had live sperm in their systems for a few years after death—managed to impregnate a human woman, there was always a risk of Vlad Syndrome. If she had it, it would kill both her and the baby unless she immediately aborted the pregnancy.

“Whyever would they check for that?” Winona raised her eyes to his, confused. “Raylan’s not a vampire.”

“So Gary’s not… Oh. Raylan’s the father.” It wasn’t a question but rather Tim processing the thought aloud. He remembered now. One-night stand with the ex-wife. Broken condom. They’d had to use the stash from his rifle case because Raylan didn’t trust the condoms he had. Tim sighed.

Winona was still staring at him as if she was confused, then she straightened up and started rubbing the tops of her thighs. “I guess Raylan didn’t tell you? When he first got back to Kentucky, we… um… got—”

He held up his hand for her to stop.

“Oh, I know about that,” Tim said. He stood abruptly with no compunction whatsoever. He wanted distance between them. He needed it. She was pregnant? He didn’t know what to think… what he should be feeling. His first thought was selfish—this would change things between him and Raylan. He didn’t think Raylan would be happy about the news. Hell, just last week, he was going on about how it was better that his line ended with him.

Tim clung greedily to that line of thought. If there was no baby… there’d be no permanent tie to this woman. But that really wasn’t his decision, and it wasn’t Raylan’s either.

“Do you want this baby?” he asked the one person who could make that call.


Tim’s heart sank. “But what?”

Winona looked pointedly around her office.

“Why are you living in your office? A couple months ago, you had a big, fine house. Don’t tell me that vampire husband of yours kicked you out after Arnett died.” Tim felt a sharp jolt of anger for her.

“No, I never went back to the house when I left the marshals safe house. I’d been staying in a hotel until this week,” she said.

“What changed this week?”

“Everything. Gary’s been working for… I think it’s been weeks in Missouri on some—” she forked two fingers on each hand making air quotes “—‘mission trip.’”

Tim scowled. “What kind of mission?”

She rolled her eyes. “After his sire died, he found a new master and joined this vampire cult or something. I found out this week he sold the house, cleaned out all our bank accounts, canceled the credit cards. It’s all gone.”
“He can do that? I thought two-ownership sales took longer—”

“The house was in Gary’s name. After everything I went through selling the house in Georgia with Raylan, it just seemed logical. Besides, Gary is… or was, a realtor. He was supposed to know what he was doing.”

“And you believed him?”

“Clearly.”

“And now you’re living in your office? You think the DOJ is going to let that slide for long?”

“I bribed the cleaning staff.”

“With what?”

Winona shot him a dirty look. “My last fifty bucks, if you must now.”

“Did you talk to Gary?” Tim asked.

“I did. He gave everything we had to his vampire cult. Anything I want to keep has to be out of the house by Monday or the new owners will… I don’t know. Keep it? Sell it? Toss it?” She started to tear up again.

“You tell Gary about your pregnancy?”

“I met him before he left for Missouri a few weeks ago. He could smell it and came to the conclusion it was Raylan’s since he and I stopped sleeping together right after he turned.”

“Great. You think this is revenge motivated?”

“I can’t even begin to guess.”

“Don’t you have some family you can stay with?”

“My sister Gayle lives in Louisville,” she said. “But my job’s here. Gary completely wiped me out. I can’t afford to lose my job with the baby on the way. Besides….”

“Besides what?”

“Gayle might hate Raylan more than she does Gary. And trust me, after Gary became a vampire, she wanted nothing to do with us,” Winona said.

Tim nodded. “Tolerant family.”

“You have no idea.”

Tim propped a his hip against her desk and crossed his arms. “Well, Raylan’s in Harlan—”

“There’s a surprise,” Winona said, rolling her eyes. “For someone who spent years telling me how much he hated it, he sure as hell spends a lot of time down there.”

“Marshal business,” Tim said. He wasn’t going to enlighten her. Tim had a damned good idea where her life savings had gone: he’d never heard of a vampire cult, but he’d heard of two vampire churches in his entire career and Boyd’s was the only one local enough to appeal to Gary. If Gary was in Missouri, Tim wondered if Winona’s ex had been the vampire to recruit Benchely and his
cronies from Malcolm’s church.

“May I ask what you’re going to do next?”

Winona slouched, deflated. “Maybe there’s a women’s shelter in Lexington.”

Tim bit his bottom lip to try to keep the words back, but he knew what he was going to say and do next, even if it was the last thing in the world he wanted.

***

About eight on Monday night, Sheeba started barking and whining.

“What’s up girl?” Tim asked. Her body language wasn’t popping as “threat” but more wiggly happiness. He heard the car pull up a few minutes later and made his way out through the sunroom to the deck to peek out and see the expected dark Town Car parking in the drive.

Raylan unfolded himself from the car and Tim held up a hand in greeting and retreated back into the kitchen. He didn’t have any expectation that what came next would go well at all.

Tim hadn’t spoken to Raylan since the week before, and it wasn’t his fault his partner never called in. He’d expected to see Raylan back in Lexington by the weekend, but it hadn’t happened, allowing tensions to build up in anticipation of his arrival.

“Raylan’s home,” he called out when he stepped back into the living room. Sheeba bounded down the stairs to the first floor to greet him.

Tim tracked his movements. He heard the door open, followed by Raylan’s “oomf” as a hundred and eighty pounds of Trollhound collided with the near equal mass of a US deputy marshal.

He listened to his lover’s boot heels on the wood flooring downstairs with accompanying dancing dog feet and then the clump, clump, clump on the stairs.

Raylan’s voice carried up the stairs. “Tim! Why is Winona’s LaCrosse parked in my spot in the carport?”

Tim leaned against the kitchen counter and took a sip of his coffee before he answered, giving Raylan enough time to clear the stairs.

“Because she’s staying here,” Tim answered.

Raylan froze at the words.

“Hi Raylan,” Winona said. She was sitting at the kitchen table working on legal forms her lawyer had given her that afternoon to prepare to the legal process of separating herself from the mess she was in with Gary and move on with a divorce.

He nodded at her. “Winona.” Raylan pulled his hat off and his eyes tracked between his lover and his ex-wife. Sheeba pressed her body into Raylan’s leg, sensing the tension in the room.

Tim walked over to the outside door to the wraparound porch off the dining area. “Sheeba, perimeter.”

After he let the dog out, he wandered over to Raylan, primarily for a kiss. When Tim crowded in close enough, Raylan only narrowed his eyes at him. Hurt, but not wanting to show it to either Raylan or Winona, Tim just shrugged. Instead he patted Raylan’s chest with his palm, letting his
hand linger just long enough to soak in his partner’s body heat. “You need to call in more often,” Tim said, pausing and giving weight to his words. “I’m going to track Sheeba down for a run. Give you two time to talk.”

When Tim got to the stairs, he turned. “And welcome home.”

As he descended the staircase, he heard Winona say, “Don’t be mad at him.”

“I’ll be whatever I damned well please with Tim. Now what the hell are you doing here Winona?”

***

Raylan was sitting on the bed he shared with Tim when his partner got back from his run. Raylan was irked that they’d never bothered to acquire any furniture suitable for sitting for their bedroom. Maybe it was because they did little in that room beyond sleeping, fucking, and dressing. He supposed he could go to the office—which was now located in the next room. Winona had told him how Tim moved the bed from the guest room upstairs into their office so she’d have the privacy of a floor between their bedrooms.

He sighed. He guessed that made sense. He couldn’t imagine loud sex with Tim with his pregnant ex-wife on the other side of the wall. He pushed the entire idea of her pregnancy out of his mind for the moment.

Raylan heard Tim come in through one of the upstairs doors, walking around before he heard the fridge door open. He knew Tim would be looking for a bottle of water from the bottom shelf. His heard his partner tell his ex good-night and Raylan braced himself as Tim jogged down the stairs.

Sure enough, Tim stepped into their bedroom with Sheeba on his heels.

“I suppose you expect me to thank you for this,” Raylan said, quietly.

Tim stopped in his tracks. He was still sweaty from his run—Raylan could see patches in the material where his track pants and long-sleeve T-shirt were clinging to his skin. Tim pushed the door shut.

“You’re mad at me.” Tim made his way over to the side of the bed where he slept. He took another long draw from his bottle of water and set it down half-empty by the lamp on the bedside table.

Raylan didn’t reply.

“You are though, aren’t you?” Tim accused. “That’s what this quiet bullshit is all about. You do get mad. You just never show it. Just like when they let Arlo go.”

Raylan worked his jaw, then dropped his elbows to his knees, hanging his head to he could dig his fingers into his hair to rub away the onset of a headache.

“You’re not your father. You can tell me you’re pissed at me,” Tim pushed.

Raylan stood up and started to pace around the room. Sheeba tracked his movements and started to whine. “Did you think I wouldn’t be?” Raylan wanted to yell but couldn’t bring himself to do it.

Winona had pissed him off plenty of times during their marriage. Raylan’d never been tempted to take to Arlo’s ways with women. He figured any man who hit a woman had run out words to make his point and turned to talking with his fists.
Raylan had always considered himself a man of few words to begin with. In his mind, if he still had words left, he’d never have to be the kind of man who resorted to his fists to win an argument with a woman.

But Tim wasn’t a woman. And Raylan was finding that that didn’t matter for shit.

Tim went over to the door and opened it just wide enough so Sheeba could find somewhere else to settle.

“I thought you’d be livid,” Tim said. “Yell at me already. Get it out of your system.”

“No,” Raylan said.

“I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer tonight Ray,” Tim raised his voice. “You’re not gonna turn into fuckin’ Arlo if you tell me what you’re feeling. Weren’t you the one who was all about pinnin’ each other down. Say what you got to say. Yell it if you need to.”

Raylan froze, then turned on Tim. “What the fuck were you thinking moving my goddamned, pregnant ex-wife into our house?” Raylan roared. He advanced on his partner getting close enough that he was towering over him.

Tim’s eyes got wide, and then he smiled. “That’s more the fuck like it.”

Raylan inhaled, shocked. “You like this.”

Tim’s eyes twinkled and he grinned.

Raylan leaned into Tim’s space and took a deep breath of Tim’s scent from under his left ear. Tim smelled like he did when he got hard… only spicier—like the difference between apple juice and cider. “This turns you on.”

Tim popped his eyebrows up and down once. “Two birds, one stone.”

Tim grabbed Raylan’s face and pulled him down for a kiss, his tongue forcing its way into Raylan’s mouth and Raylan realized he was still pissed at Tim, but now he was both pissed and aroused.

Raylan pushed Tim back onto the bed and followed him down, their mouths melded together. He humped against Tim’s running pants, trying to get traction and pressure against his hardening cock. While he could smell how much Tim wanted him, he also wanted to feel the evidence against his hip or better yet, wrap his hand around Tim’s hard cock.

“These fucking pants have to go,” Raylan murmured into Tim’s mouth.

“For good or just for now?” Tim pulled back.

Raylan pulled away and untied the drawstring on Tim’s pants. “For now.” He hooked his fingers under the waistband and elastic band of Tim’s jockstrap and tugged them both down past his knees. His lover lifted his hips to help, then propped himself up on his elbows watching.

Raylan sank to his knees between Tim’s legs. “What do you want?”

Tim sat up and wiggled forward to the edge of the bed. His hard cock was lewdly standing at attention.

“Suck my cock.” It wasn’t a question.
Since Bo, Tim had treated Raylan ever so carefully when it came to blow jobs. Raylan missed that part of their sex life since he’d only given blowjobs few times with other men before he got together with Tim. If Tim was asking him for it though, some good must have come from his going down on Tim in Harlan a couple weeks back.

“All right.”

***

Tim groaned. He couldn’t help it. Raylan was on his knees doing everything he could to swallow Tim’s cock. He knew emotions were running high between them, but he wanted his hand on Raylan’s head. He slowly slid a hand into Raylan’s hair.

“This okay?”

Raylan hummed his approval and Tim’s cock jerked involuntarily, so Tim dug his fingers into the back of Raylan’s hair, guiding him as his head as it bobbed on Tim’s cock.

No sound in particular made Tim look past Raylan, but when he did, he saw Winona filling the open space in their bedroom doorway that Sheeba left ajar when she escaped upstairs. The woman’s eyes were glued to Raylan. Her mouth was slightly open but so far, silent.

Tim puckered his lips in a nonverbal ‘shhhhh’ gesture. He watched Raylan working his cock and realized his partner hadn’t noticed her behind him. She was watching them, captivated. Raylan’s face was buried in Tim’s lap and there was no way Tim was willing to allow anything to put another pall on oral sex, now that Raylan was comfortable with it again.

Besides… while it didn’t turn him on to have her watch them, he realized he still liked it. It satisfied him to see her shocked and blushing as she took them in. He wanted her to see Raylan like this for him and no one else. Finally, he felt like he’d won something from her. And, he had.

Raylan slowed down and fondled Tim’s balls in his hand. He rubbed his goatee against them making Tim gasp and moan involuntarily. It took everything Tim had not to come while she was watching. Once he caught his breath, he flicked the fingers on his left hand, waving Winona out of the room. She shook her head as if coming out of a daze, nodding sharply and backing away just as Raylan pulled off Tim’s cock.

Tim bent to kiss Raylan, pushing his tongue into his mouth to taste himself as Winona slipped silently back into the hallway.

Chapter End Notes

I hope everyone had great holiday and end of the year. Sorry this chapter has taken so long. I had a nice break in December and am back and excited about finishing this book and starting the next one. Chapter 9 is halfway done. No promises as to when I’ll post but Jonjo and I both have it on our minds. As mentioned in comments if you read and post there, I'm not holding to a posting schedule because I hate missing deadlines, even the self-imposed ones.
I want to thank you ALL for following, reading, commenting, and kudos-ing. I love all feedback in any measure and promise to respond if you drop me a line.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

As always, I want to thank Jonjo for beta-reading and listening to me patter on about the rest of the plot for this and the next book. But this chapter... was long. To say the least. So, a very special thanks goes out to Jonjo for beta-reading the longest chapter I've written in this series to date. Everyone, please think love in her direction: she deserves it. I freaked out a couple nights ago when I thought this chapter was going to fifty pages. I think she and I were both relieved when it ended at thirty-seven. Of course, then I dumped another ten pages on her from Chapter 10... so yeah, think her ALL the love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning found Tim leaning against the kitchen counter cradling a coffee mug in his hand. Raylan sidled up next to him positioning his body perpendicular to Tim’s. Raylan was still in his sock feet and boxers with his hair standing on end where it was still short enough to stick up.

“What do you need?” Tim poked at him. He really didn’t care what Raylan needed when he was this close. They’d finally got around to talking some the night before. Neither one of them was crazy about the idea of Winona living there, but Raylan said he understood why Tim felt he couldn’t send the woman pregnant with his lover’s child to a homeless shelter.

“Just a mug.” Raylan slid his right hand onto Tim’s stomach then reached up behind him with his left to the dish drainer to grab his favorite mug.

The mug sat on the counter forgotten, but Raylan’s hand pressed flat to Tim’s stomach, sliding to curve around his waist. He crowded into Tim’s space to kiss his neck under his earlobe. With his back to the room, he didn’t hear Winona open the office door—which was now her bedroom.

Tim did, though.

His eyes landed on hers and he waited a beat. “Sleep well, Winona?”

“I did, thanks,” she said, her tone careful.

Raylan drew away from Tim. His face closing down, he poured himself a cup of coffee. “I better hit the shower. Morning Winona. Coffee in the pot if you want it.”

Tim clocked Raylan’s quick get-away, then moved over to the Keurig, dug around in the black metal drawer under the machine to find the K-cup he was looking for. “Don’t drink that coffee. Raylan made it.” Tim said. He pressed a button on the machine and waited for the brew to stop sputtering into a mug.

Winona laughed. “His coffee is awful, isn’t it?”

Tim handed her the mug and nodded at it. “Decaf.”

She raised her eyes to his, looking surprised. “Thank you,” she said, taking the mug but not sipping from it.
“Even if his coffee was drinkable, it’s caffeinated. Sorry, I don’t know how you take it.”

Winona shrugged. “This is fine.”

Sheeba finished eating and nosed the door to the porch in the dining room, adding another wet nose-print to the glass. Tim let her out.

“That’s one big dog,” Winona said.

Tim nodded. “Trollhound mix. Officially, as a K-9 officer, she’s a preternatural deputy US Marshal.”

Winona ran her finger around the rim of her coffee mug. “She’s actually kind of scary. I got up to use the restroom last night and nearly tripped over her. I about had a heart attack.”

Tim huffed a laugh out, then stopped because Winona didn’t look amused.

“That’ll happen. You’ll get used to her.”

“I’m not sure about that. Maybe you could keep her downstairs or in your room at night, at least?”

“Now that’s not gonna happen. Her nature is to protect her people.”

“Hmm.”

When she didn’t add anything, Tim decided to let the conversation drop. He was not going to pen Sheeba up.

Tim heard the water come on downstairs, signaling that Raylan was in the shower.

Winona wandered over the kitchen table and sat down. “Did you tell him?”

“Who?”

“Raylan.”

“Tell him what?”

Her eyes flashed to his, her cheeks pinkening. “Don’t play stupid, Marshal.”

Tim sighed. “All right. Did I tell him that his ex-wife is a creeping voyeur? No.”

“What about your exhibitionist side?” Winona countered, smiling at him. “You can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy that.”

When Tim realized she was trying to flirt with him, he laughed. “Exhibitionist? You can back that right up, lady. That wasn’t an exhibition. Well, okay, it was. But it wasn’t exhibitionism for the sake of getting off. This…” Tim waved a finger back and forth between them and circled it down the stairs in the direction Raylan had gone. “This isn’t some ‘Three’s Company’ shit that’ll ever turn into a threesome, if you’re thinking that. Last night, that was me making a point.”

“And what point was that?”

Tim didn’t answer. If she hadn’t gotten it, he wasn’t sure he could put it into words.

“I don’t want him back,” she offered.

“You say that now,” he said. “But you’re sitting in his house, at his table. Why is that? You have
family around that you have to like more than me and my dog. You could always get a job in Louisville and live with your sister.”

“I could. But she hates Raylan... and I’m not sure she wouldn’t pressure me to end the pregnancy. Raylan… well, he’d never do that. Even if it’s not what he wants.”

He nodded. “Is that what he told you?”

“Not in so many words.” She sipped her coffee. “This is good, thank you.”

Tim waited.

“You don’t like me very much, do you?”

“I don’t dislike you.” That much was true.

Winona narrowed her eyes at him. “So what is it? Jealousy? Or do you just hate women altogether?”

Before she’d spied on them the night before, Tim might have called his feelings jealousy. After all, Raylan liked the woman well enough to have sex with her two months ago. Once. Tim sighed. “Trust. You cheated on Raylan once. Then, you cheated on the man you were with, with him. That makes twice.”

“As if Raylan was always faithful,” Winona said. “Women… men… fall at his feet. Always have. You’re a LEO. You know the statistics of divorce rates in law enforcement marriages.”

“It’s not him I don’t trust,” Tim said.

Winona scoffed. “He’s clearly in love with you, not me.”

Tim stood up and rinsed his mug in the sink, then turned for the stairs. “That may be. But I’m not carrying his child, am I?”

“Touché,” she said, lifting her mug.

Tim was about to call for Sheeba when he remembered something Winona’d said in her office the other day. “Quick question… while we’re laying our cards on the table. You said you and Gary stopped sleeping together when he turned. Why was that?”

Winona looked surprised. “Have you ever been with a vampire? Sexually?”

Tim shook his head. “No, I just kill them.”

“Thinking of branching out?” Winona asked, then mumbled, “Now, who’s the cheater?”

Tim’s felt his stance grow still and knew she’d be thrown off by it. People typically read what they wanted when he seemed unreadable. Winona didn’t know about Raylan being tied to Boyd as his human servant and he wasn’t about to tell her. While he’d given up the idea of turning to shift the human servant bond between Raylan and Boyd to one between Raylan and himself, it was still a last-ditch option in the back of his mind. Besides, Celaeno’s prophecy lingered. According to Louis, the prof who’d studied harpies, her prophecies never played out how people expected them to; but they did play out. Tim knew he’d have to give something up for Raylan eventually. He figured it was better to be informed—even if it led Winona to think he was thinking of taking up with a vampire.

“You were in love enough with Gary before he turned to leave Raylan for him. I’m just curious why
that part of your relationship changed.”

“When they go to sleep, they don’t sleep. They die. Who wants to spoon with a cold, lifeless body? When they wake up, they can’t… um… get it up until they feed. The glamor only works if they bite you… and I don’t want to be a vampire so letting my husband at my neck to make sex even remotely enjoyable was out of the question,” Winona said. “Is that enough to put you off?”

“Yep,” he lied, popping the “p”. Tim thought the right question was, would it be enough to put Raylan off him if they did end up taking that particular last-ditch option?

***

Tim opened the passenger-side door on the extended cab of his truck to let Sheeba hop up into the back. He expected Raylan to come up behind them until he heard his partner open the door to his Town Car.

Tim turned, holding out his hands. “What? You’re not riding with us?”

Raylan mimicked Tim’s gesture, shrugging with his hands held open before him and then waved them in the direction of his car. “I just got my car back. If I don’t drive it, Art’ll take it away again.”

“You sure this isn’t about…” Tim waved at the house behind him. Winona had driven off to the courthouse in her Buick a good hour before them.

Tim could see the deep inhale of Raylan’s sigh in his wide shoulders before he made his way over to him. When he’d closed the distance, he dropped a kiss on Tim’s mouth.

“We’re good,” Raylan said.

“You sure?” Tim wondered if this wasn’t Raylan’s way of getting a little space.

“We settled this last night,” Raylan said. “Art really will take my car back if I don’t drive it, then I won’t have transport if I need it for a zombie job.”

“If you need your own wheels, we could buy you a c—”

Raylan pressed a finger to his lips to shush him up. “No. If I want a car, I’ll buy my own.”

“All right.” Tim dropped his hands to his sides in defeat, backing away. Clearly, he’d touched a nerve. He thought they’d gotten past the money issue. “I’ll see you at work.”

***

Tim spent the better part of the day in court. A family was suing for the right to have their dead son staked before he rose as a vampire. Their would-be daughter-in-law was the newly dead and contended that her fiancé intended to spend eternity with her as the undead. Tim wasn’t all that sure about the eternity part—he’d seen enough vampires meet their demise to know that eternity often turned out to be not all that long. In this case, each party had an advanced directive signed at different times during the man’s life and both were passionate about the man’s death.

Tim thought it seemed like a no-brainer—take the directive with the later date. But the parents were Bible thumpers—definitely not of Boyd’s variety—and desperately believed that their son’s soul would be lost to Hell if his body rose in death.
Vasquez decided that since they had two preternatural marshals working out of the district office, Tim would attend court and testify as an expert if necessary and Raylan would stand guard in the morgue to either stake the son before nightfall or protect his body until he rose from the dead.

The judge found in favor of the fiancé.

After court, Tim swung through the office to pick up Sheeba, who the judge had sternly excused from the courtroom early on in the proceedings.

He expected to find her asleep on the dog bed he kept behind his desk in his cubicle, but found it empty.

“Where’s Sheeba?” Tim asked looking around.

“Try Art’s office,” Rachel said.

Tim stuck his head in the door. “Hey Art, word has it you have my dog?”

Art nodded in the direction of the couch.

Sheeba looked up at him wearing what Tim swore was her “innocent” expression.

Tim groaned. “Aw Chief… you let her sleep on the couch? She’ll be all over them at home now.”

“What? You make this sweet girl sleep on the floor?” Art smirked at Tim. “Is your daddy bein’ mean to you, honey? You come on over to our house any old time you want,” Art cooed at her.

“Chief. Do I need to remind you that she’s the equivalent of a deputy marshal? You’re baby-talking one of your deputies.”

“Then that makes me her boss, doesn’t it? Which means I can baby-talk her if I want to.”

“Well, say what you need to say to her. I need to take your little princess here home so Raylan can pick me up to follow-up on that lead I told you about in Arnett’s death.”

“Really now? And you’re not taking the muscle?” Art waved at Sheeba.

“We’re meeting the local Ulfri—the wolf pack’s alpha. Hoping he can give us an idea of who’s capable of a partial shift in the area. It’ll go better if she sits this one out.”

“All right, let me know how it goes,” Art said. “Leslie says to clear the Saturday after Thanksgiving to bring Sheeba out to meet the grandkids.”

“I’ll tell Raylan.”

***

Raylan picked up Tim at the house well after dark that night.

“We could take my truck,” Tim said, settling into the passenger side of the Town Car.

Raylan scowled at him. “I think you just like to drive. No, I know you like to drive.”

“My truck has weapon caches. This grandpa car doesn’t even have a siren.”

“It’s a posh ride,” Raylan said, reclining a little further back into the seat.
Tim rolled his eyes. “So where does this meet go down?”

“So Dr. Lillian’s house.”

“Really?”

“She says it’s ‘neutral ground’ for the greater Lexington were community,” Raylan said.

“What does that mean?”

“Guess we’ll find out. She’s not too far. On our end of Lexington’s outskirts.”

***

About twenty minutes later, Raylan pulled down a long driveway.

Tim whistled. “How much do coroners make in Kentucky?”

Raylan squinted at the two-story house far down the drive. It was surrounded by woods and land. There were neighbors in the far, far distance. They’d passed the houses on the way in. But strategically planted copses of trees kept them out of the line of sight of the property.

“And I thought you liked living in isolation,” Raylan murmured.

“You don’t like country living?” Tim sounded a little defensive and Raylan felt a twinge of guilt.

“You’ve seen my childhood home. What do you think?” he said.

His eyes slid over to Tim’s face, but his partner didn’t look reassured by the comment.

Raylan sighed. “She said to park around back.”

Dr. Lillian was standing at the top of limestone steps that looked like they led down to a basement as Raylan and Tim approached the house.

“Good evening Marshals, the Ulfric is already here. We’re going to take this meeting in the infirmary, if you don’t mind,” she said. She turned in her brisk, no-nonsense manner leaving the door open, clearly expecting them to follow her.

“Infirmary?” Tim whispered.

Raylan shrugged.

Raylan pulled his hat off, holding it in his hands after they entered just what she described—a full basement that ran the length of her house. A few chairs in a corner made up a waiting-room area. He could see a setup deeper in the room that looked like an ER—with gurneys and medical equipment and even runners built into the ceiling so curtains could be pulled around the gurneys for privacy. It looked like she’d walled off some rooms on the other end of the basement too.

“What is this place?” Tim asked.

Dr. Lillian frowned at him. “You didn’t tell me you were bringing anyone else.”

“He’s my partner,” Raylan said. He knew that she knew Tim was his partner, after all, he’d been in and out of her office for the last two months taking care of morgue stakings. Since they’d returned from New Mexico, she probably saw more of Tim than she did Raylan. But he could tell she wasn’t
satisfied with his answer. “And he’s my mate.”

She nodded then. Preternatural creatures, especially any form of lycan, seemed to hold “mate” to a different level of esteem than “boyfriend” or even “spouse.”

“It’s a clinic for the local lycanthrope community. Some individuals risk outing as lycan if they step into a mundane ER,” she said. “And… we know more about taking care of our own than most physicians. The Ulfric is already back in my office.”

She turned on her heel again, walked as it she expected them to keep up, and stopped at an open door in one of the first rooms in the back part of the basement.

When they caught up to her, she stepped into the room. “Jamil, this is deputy US marshal Raylan Givens and deputy Tim Gutterson.”

“I thought you said one marshal,” Jamil said, standing up. He was as tall as Raylan, but much more thickly muscled. His long dreads fell down his back, moving as he looked from Raylan to Tim.

“He brought his mate,” she said and the Ulfric nodded. “Deputies, this is Jamil, the Ulfric of the greater Lexington area.”

Raylan held out his hand. “Raylan Givens. Thanks for agreeing to meet with us.”

Jamil took his hand and then stopped, tightening his grip. “Why do you smell of wolf? And Munin.” His eyes flipped to Tim. “If that’s your mate, why do you have the smell of lupa magic all over you?”

“That’s kind of a long story,” Raylan said, wincing. “My cousin is the lupa of a pack in southern Kentucky. We’ve been practicing some death magic—I’m an animator.”

Jamil huffed. “Why does that smell like a lie?” When Jamil didn’t release his hand, Raylan squeezed back, surprised when he saw the other man wince but not let go. “What are you?”

Great, he’d managed to get into a pissing match with an alpha werewolf. He saw Tim’s hand settle at his waist where his weapon rested.

“A marshal. An animator.”

“Deputy, he’s shown you his by coming here, maybe you should extend the same courtesy,” Dr. Lillian said. “And as your mate so aptly put it to me last month, show him yours.”

“And necromancer.” Raylan let his hand go limp in hopes that the alpha wolf would see that as submission.

Jamil released his hand. “The Munin are made of death magic,” Jamil said, nodding. “Which pack is your cousin part of? Those packs in the southern part of the state are kind of lawless.”

“Bennett County,” Raylan said.

Jamil tilted his head to the side like that news was only so-so. “Could have been worse. Could have been Harlan. That pack’s an embarrassment to our kind,” Jamil said, shaking his head.

Tim snorted.

Jamil turned to him and stared. Tim raised his eyebrows at him. “You said it, I didn’t.”
Raylan watched the two men size up each other. Jamil towered over Tim in height and sheer bulk, but his lover stared back, his eyes emptying into something cold and flat—the Air-Force-blue tint was glacial.

Jamil nodded. “Nice choice of mate, Necromancer. Not many truly dominant humans.”

Raylan eyed Tim who stood unmoved by what Raylan guessed was a compliment.

He turned back to Jamil. “Ulfric, we’re actually here on marshal business.”

“Dr. Lillian told me,” he said.

“We’re hoping to track down werewolves in the Frankfort area with the ability to partial shift,” Raylan said. “We had a vampire with his heart torn out by a partially shifted wolf a few months back.”

“And you’re just getting around to asking?” Jamil said, he moved to take his seat back.

Raylan and Tim followed suit, while Dr. Lillian sat behind her desk.

“You know I can’t give you the names of any of my wolves, not that I think they’d do such a thing,” he said.

“Do you think we should just take your word that no one in your pack would kill a vampire?” Tim asked.

“Yes,” Jamil said.

“We think this wolf committed the crime with a vampire,” Raylan added.

“Ahh. That makes more sense. There was a power shift in the lycanthrope communities around Louisville because there was a new master vampire in the area. New masters have new animals to call.”

“I thought Louisville city was controlled by a married couple that held the Lexington area, too, and were loyal to the Detroit master,” Tim said.

“They are, but every so often Detroit sends their master vampires around.”

“When was that?” Raylan said

“A few months back. Just before your guy in Frankfort died.”

“Ever met the master they sent down to this area?” Tim asked.

“Once, creepy even for a vampire. Big smile, looked like a short albino with crazy eyes. He tried to sway me—his animal to call is the wolf—but he couldn’t since I’m Ulfric. I made it pretty clear he needed to keep away from our pack members. Our pack is possibly one of the only stable packs in Eastern Kentucky.”

“Why is that?” Raylan asked.

“You’ve seen the southern packs yourselves. But there’s not a vampire master in Lexington or northern Kentucky with wolves as their animal to call. That’s not the case for some of the other cities and packs. The southern Kentucky packs have had a big problem with that. Corrupt vampires corrupting their local wolf packs.”
“Did Arnett have an animal to call?” Raylan asked.

“Not to my knowledge,” Jamil said. “The vampires have left us be ’til that little blond guy tried to push his way in here.”

“How’d you stop him?” Tim asked.

“As Ulfric, I can remain uninfluenced.”

“If you could stand up to that master, how come the southern packs can’t make the area master vampires back down?” Tim said.

“Well, I could back the albino vamp down, but my other wolves couldn’t though. Can’t speak to the southern packs. Like I said, they’re a mess.”

“So how do you know one of your own wolves didn’t kill Arnett then, if the master vamp could sway them?” Raylan asked.

“I just do. I’d look for the albino if I were you. He smelled… wrong.”

“Great, Art will love that answer,” Tim mumbled.

***

On the walk back to the car Tim said, “Infirmary reminds me. Weren’t we going to get tested when we got back from Harlan?”

Raylan drew a blank. “For?”

Tim stopped in place falling a few steps behind him. “What do think?”

Raylan cringed and was thankful his partner couldn’t see his face.

“Great. You forgot.” Tim passed Raylan and waited for him to unlock the car.

Sitting in the front seat in silence, Raylan didn’t start the ignition.

“I didn’t forget-forget,” he said.

Tim’s disbelief was apparent on his face.

“So I forgot. It’s just been a helluva couple weeks. I still want that.”

Tim didn’t answer.

“That’s if you do,” he said, gripping the wheel in his fists, squeezing and releasing. “Do you?”

“Sure,” Tim said.

“I’m sorry, Tim,” Raylan whispered.

Tim didn’t immediately reply.

“Are we okay?” Raylan asked.
“Sure.”

“This, I can fix,” Raylan said, getting out of the car. Tim heard him mumble, “Winona, not so much” before he shut the door.

Tim heard Raylan talking on his cell phone, then he opened the door and stuck his head in.

“Come on, we’re going back in,” Raylan said.

Tim followed him back into the basement clinic where Dr. Lillian was waiting.

“Jamil left already. And I sent all the staff home tonight so you could have some privacy with the Ulfric.”

She led them to one of the gurneys Tim had seen on his way in. “You both can go ahead and sit up there and I’ll grab a couple blood collection kits. HIV, sexually transmitted diseases and the full lycanthropy spectrum?”

Raylan looked surprised and she picked up on it.

“If you’re doing this to move forward in your relationship, just testing for HIV isn’t sufficient. Given the work you both do, you have to realize I’m right,” she said. “Lycanthropy is as easily passed on as sexually transmitted or blood-born diseases. You need to know you’re both clear if you’re going to stop using condoms.”

Tim swallowed, his throat dry suddenly, fighting a blush. “The whole run, then.”

She stepped into the back. “Be right back.”

“This is what you wanted, right?” Raylan asked.

“Yeah… I just thought with the regular testing through work we were clear of lycanthropy.”

“Have you taken the vaccine?” Raylan asked.

Tim paused. “No.”

“Me either,” Raylan said.

“It seemed too risky. People pick up lycanthropy from the vaccine as often as they protect themselves from it. If it’s going to happen, I’d rather face it fighting than from fear,” Tim explained.

“Makes sense,” Raylan said, bumping his shoulder. “Sounds like you.”

***

Raylan had just merged onto I-75 heading back to their house when his cell rang displaying Art’s number. He handed it to Tim who swiped it open.

“Gutterson here Chief,” Tim said, putting the phone on speaker.
“Didn’t I call Raylan?” Art asked.

“He’s driving. You’re on speaker.”

“How’d things go with your werewolf?”

“Says it’s none of his people,” Raylan said.

“You believe him?” Art asked.

“You know, I think I do. Tim?”

“I’m with Raylan on that.”

“He said one of Detroit’s master vamps had been down in this area a couple months ago.”

“So vampire politics?”

“Sounds like” Raylan said. “Still would like to close that one.”

“What’s up Chief?”

“Boyd Crowder’s lawyer was in tonight. He’s suing for his church—have a meeting with him and his lawyer tomorrow night. Why don’t you two come in around two tomorrow? It’s gonna be a long day otherwise.”

Tim and Raylan were at their desks when Boyd came in.

“Well, Raylan Givens, if you’re not a sight for sore eyes.”

“Didn’t think vampires suffered pain, Boyd,” Raylan responded. “Including sore eyes.”

Boyd sat down in front of Raylan’s desk and this close, Raylan felt a wash of cool death power from Boyd. Since Marianne had sealed over their bond with the Munin, his connection to Boyd had been muted. No dreams. No sudden surges of power when the master vampire blood-oathed other vampires. It was almost peaceful.

“Mind if I have a private word with you Raylan?” Boyd asked.

Raylan shrugged. “Sure Boyd. Not sure your attorney would approve though.”

“This don’t concern her. And it ain’t like she’s here at the moment.”

“All right. We can go in the conference room.”

“Oh, I remember the way.”

“Yeah, I bet you do,” Tim said. “What’s he want?”

Raylan shrugged. “Guess I’ll find out.”

Art came out of his office just as Raylan was pulling the door shut behind them.

“What’s going on?” Art said.

He heard Tim reply, “Boyd wanted a word with Raylan.”
“Boyd, if this is about your church, that’s got nothing to do with me. You and your lawyer are gonna need to talk to—”

“What did you do Raylan?” Boyd demanded.

“Seized your church?”

“I ain’t talkin’ about that. What did you do to the bond? Until I got within a few feet of you, I couldn’t feel you at all.”

“I guess you could say I took control of it.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because you’re a power-hungry asshole. Every time you blood-oath and gain an influx of power, it’d spill over into me. I had roadkill throwing itself through my bedroom window one night.”

“Bet your sniper friend enjoyed that.” Boyd laughed.

“He did shoot it,” Raylan mused. “But you also shot a vampire down right in front of me and my partner—two preternatural deputy US marshals. Either one of us had every right to kill you that night. But I can’t. Because if I kill you, I’d die. Even you have to understand that this situation is hardly tenable.”

“This close though, I can feel that you’re still my human servant. You’re just blocking it somehow.”

“Does it matter Boyd?”

“I do believe it does Raylan,” Boyd said. “We’re both weaker this way.”

“I know. I’m fine being weaker, Boyd. And it’s not my job to be your battery backup. My job is to kill bad vampires. I suggest you try hard not to become one. For both our sakes.”

Vasquez wanted Art, Raylan, Tim, Rachel and Clive to sit in on the meeting with Boyd and Monica Vespucci and a special agent from the IRS brought in by Boyd’s attorney.

“IRS special agent,” Clive whispered in awe to the other marshals at the table while Vasquez and Vespucci stood in the doorway making introductions. “You never see those guys. They’re like the accountant’s version of men in black.”

“Geez Clive, keep it in your pants, it’s not like he’s a rock star,” Tim whispered back.

“Damned close,” Clive said, his eyes on the conversation in the doorway.

When it came down to it, none of the marshals had any input on the proceedings.

Raylan watched them argue the infringement on Boyd’s First Amendment rights in taking his church. Surprisingly, the IRS agent warned Vasquez that the federal government could be liable if they examined some of the church’s records—as churches like Boyd’s qualified for protection from IRS audit.

The back-and-forth went on. Vasquez countered that they were investigating a criminal case.

“What case?” Vespucci asked.

“The one against Bo Crowder.”
Art winced, Raylan groaned, and Vespucci smiled.

“David, Bo Crowder is dead—executed by your marshals. There is no criminal case against him any longer.”

“We’re still assessing his assets,” Vasquez said.

“The Modern Eternal Life Church is not and never was one of Bo Crowder’s assets. If the US Attorney’s office is not preparing to drop the seizure of Boyd’s church, then we will see you in court.”

Vasquez shrugged. “Fine by me.”

Clive told Tim and Raylan later as they sat in the office waiting to leave that he’d be surprised if Boyd didn’t get the church back—it was just a matter of time.

***

Late Thursday evening, Raylan and Tim were out on in their sunroom looking at the stars—giving Winona and themselves some space—when they heard a shriek and a string of profanity.

“Tim!” Winona screamed his name.

It wasn’t the scream of the frightened but of the frightening. One Raylan knew well.

Raylan turned big eyes to Tim. “What’d you do?” he asked, recognizing the doghouse-warning tone in her voice. He had to admit he didn’t miss that.

“I dunno.” Tim shrugged. “Sounds like we better go find out.”

“You should anyway. Every man for himself,” Raylan jibed.

“Dick. Tell me why I keep you again?”

Tim pulled himself off the couch and headed for the inside door.

“Might be my dick,” Raylan muttered.

“I heard that,” Tim called out. “And that’s not why.”

Raylan heaved himself up and followed his partner. He might talk a good game and he was pretty sure Tim could hold his own but he’d seen behaviors in his ex-wife over the last week he’d never seen during their marriage—namely tears and extreme bitchiness. She blamed the pregnancy hormones. If he hadn’t made a study of this woman during their marriage, he wouldn’t have believed it.

Winona had met Tim halfway between her room and the porch.

“Look what your mutt has done now.” Winona waved a shoe in front of her, then handed it to Tim. It wasn’t necessarily tattered, but it’d clearly been adored on a while by Sheeba. The black suede upper was matted and stained with Trollhound saliva. The shiny red bottom had tooth dentations and the slim high heel had a distinct gnaw mark bending it slightly to the side.

Tim looked surprised. “Wow, she’s never done this before. But… she was an adult when I found
her. I missed her puppy years.”

Raylan picked up a hint of sadness in his partner’s tone.

Tim turned the shoe around in his hands. “Huh.”

“Huh? That’s the best you can do? Those are Christian Louboutin suede pumps.”

“Okay,” Tim said. “I’ll replace them. No harm done then, right?”

“They’re seven hundred dollar shoes, Tim,” Winona snapped, clearly thinking that they were outside a deputy marshal’s budget.

Tim raised a narrow look at her, then shrugged. “I’m good for it.”

Raylan waited a beat to see if Winona would challenge him further. She didn’t, so he added. “Winona, he is, actually.”

Winona turned surprised eyes to Tim, then Raylan.

Both Tim and Raylan looked around for Sheeba to find her hunched in on herself by her favorite door in the kitchen.

“Sheeba,” Tim sighed, heading for his dog.

“See, she even looks guilty,” Winona said, trailing behind.

“She’s not guilty,” Tim commented. “She’d scared. Look at her eyes—all whale-eye round and her ears are back.”

Tim knelt before her and started talking softly to her.

“Winona.” Raylan cautioned with one word, pulling her away. “What’d you do?”

“I just yelled at her.”

“This is a dog who’s not scared to take down lycanthropes and vampires, but you’ve got her cowering by the back door.”

Winona bit her bottom lip.

Raylan pointed at her face and squinted at her. “Now who looks guilty.”

“I can’t help it. She’s always underfoot. I have black dog hair on all my skirts because she constantly presses up against me.”

“Maybe she likes you?” Raylan offered.

Winona rolled her eyes. “Why is it dogs gravitate to the very people who hate them the most? It’s like they’re trying too hard.”

Raylan pinched the bridge of his nose at her admission. This was an old argument dating back to their marriage when he’d wanted a dog and she didn’t. The list of excuses had been long: he was always gone with work; she would have to take care of it. But it really came down to her hating dogs. and he guessed that he’d always known that had been the case.
Tim cleared his throat. “I don’t think it’s that she likes you as much as she likes the baby. Her scent receptors are preternatural. My guess is she recognizes something of Raylan in the baby, triggering her protective instincts. Probably why she sleeps outside your door at night now.”

“How is chewing up my Christian Louboutin’s protecting the baby?” Winona asked.

Tim shrugged. “Got me. Maybe someday we can get Nahtoo to find out, but I doubt it.”

“What’s a ‘not too’?” Winona asked.

“Nevermind that,” Raylan said.

“Send me a link for the shoes Winona,” Tim said. “And you might want to put any others up where Sheeba can’t get to them.”

“Thank you,” Winona said primly and returned to her bedroom, shutting the door.

“You want to go for a run with us?” Tim asked Raylan. “It’ll help run off her anxiety.”

“Not running in boots,” Raylan said.

“Yet, you run in them if there’s a bad vampire that needs chasin’.” Tim sighed. “You send me a link too, and I’ll order you running shoes when I order Winona’s shoes. Did she spend that much on shoes when you were married to her?”

“Shit no,” Raylan said. “That happened on Gary’s watch.”

***

“What is wrong with your hair?” Rachel asked, as Tim passed her desk the next Tuesday morning. “Sheeba’s got better hair than you.”

Tim didn’t answer, but rolled his eyes.

Raylan, already at his desk, laughed.

In his cubicle, he made sure Sheeba got settled, then mumbled, “I can’t get the new bathroom schedule down.”

“What was that?” Rachel asked.

Tim pursed his lips. “I can’t get any time in the bathroom.”

Rachel eyed Raylan critically. “The cowboy’s easy on the eyes, I’ll give you that. But he wears a damned hat most of the time. He can’t take that much time to primp,” she said.

Tim shook his head, not mentioning Raylan’s ex.

“It’s your own fault,” Raylan said.

Tim sat down, taking Raylan’s comment as the go-ahead to discuss Winona. “I know, I invited her.”

“Her?” Rachel nearly shouted. “Who’s her? And why do you both feel so… verklempt about her?”

“Winona,” Raylan told Rachel who gave him a quizzical look. “We might as well tell her. If we go to that thing at Art’s after Thanksgiving, they’ll all find out anyway. Can’t not take Winona. She and
Leslie were tight when we lived in Georgia.”

“Why is your ex-wife living with you?” Rachel asked.

Raylan ignored her to continue on with Tim.

“But the reason it’s your fault is for buying a house with only one full bath.”

“Then we’ll get the upstairs bathroom renovated,” Tim said, logging into his computer.

“If you do that, she’ll be in the bedroom next to ours. Think about it. One bathroom. Pregnant woman. Stairs.”

“Wait a minute, Winona’s pregnant?” Rachel asked, standing in front of Raylan’s desk now.

“Shit,” Tim said. “I’ll just cut my hair. Too long now anyway.”

By this time, Art had come out of his office. “Your ex is pregnant?”

“No!” Raylan said focused on Tim, thinking about how much he liked to wrap his fingers into the length of Tim’s hair during sex. Any sex. All sex.

“Then why does Rachel think she is?” Art asked.

“Because she is,” Tim said to Art, ignoring Raylan.

“Are you a bonehead this morning or just being purposely dense?” Art asked Raylan and leveled a hard look at Raylan.

“What’d I do?” Raylan said focused on Tim, thinking about how much he liked to wrap his fingers into the length of Tim’s hair during sex. Any sex. All sex.

“Then why does Rachel think she is?” Art asked.

“Because she is,” Tim said to Art, ignoring Raylan.

“Are you a bonehead this morning or just being purposely dense?” Art asked Raylan and leveled a hard look at Raylan.

“What’d I do?” Raylan said. “Tim invited Winona to live with us until she gets back on her feet,” Raylan said. “Seems Gary left her high and dry and gave all their money to a vampire cult.”

“Really now.”

“Really. Better tell Leslie it’ll be one more next Saturday when we do the thing with Sheeba and the grandbabies.”

“All right,” Art answered his eyes sliding back and forth between Raylan and Tim. “Just got a call from the staties with a case down in Harlan. The AUSA needs you two in court pronto for the judge to sign over an execution warrant. Got a human death that looks like a werewolf attack.”

“Do you know if they have a suspect or will this be a blind warrant?” Tim asked. Often judges would sign a blind warrant over to executioners in cases where they knew a lycanthrope or vampires was the guilty party, but they didn’t know which individual that was. Tim hated blind warrants; they were a perversion of the justice system because the preternatural deputy marshal assigned the warrant became the detective, judge, jury, and executioner.

“Blind, I think. They didn’t know much. Just called a few minutes ago and asked for the two of you,” Art said. “Oh, and take Tim’s vehicle. Raylan, need you to clear out your Town Car and leave the keys. They need it up in Covington for a spell.”

“Again?”

“Was Ashland before. Besides, it’s not a policy that the marshal’s service provide you with a vehicle. You’re a big boy. Buy your own damned car or ride with your boyfriend.”
Tim’s smile at Raylan was thin lipped and just the wrong side of a smirk which earned him a glare in return. “Did you say something to Art about my car?” Raylan asked.

“Nope.” Tim popped the “p” hard.

Raylan propped his hat on his head. “Don’t even think about cutting your hair,” Raylan growled.

Tim grinned.

The judge signed over the warrant to Tim since the hunt was likely for a werewolf. Between his past hunting experience and being Sheeba’s official handler, he was the more logical choice.

With Raylan’s car turned over to Art and their go-bags in Tim’s truck, they made a quick stop by the Ford house to pick up a cooler with Sheeba’s food in case they were in Harlan longer than planned. These jaunts down to the southern part of the state kept turning into longer trips with stay-overs of one or more nights, it seemed.

A few hours later, they pulled up to the address Art gave them for the scene—a little house outside Lynch on the eastern end of Harlan County.

Checking in at the command post, they learned Tom Bergen was inside and were directed to put on hazmat-level protective gear—both for themselves and the scene. A forensic tech from Harlan County frowned at Sheeba.

“I don’t have anything that will fit her feet if you need to take her in,” the tech said.

“That’s okay,” Tim said. “We’ll check it out and either clear the scene or take evidence with us for her to scent from.”

A moment later, Trooper Tom Bergen stuck his head out the front door, asking if the marshals had shown up yet. When he saw Raylan and Tim, he waved them forward. Tim ordered Sheeba to wait with the tech and they headed into the house.

“Thanks for coming,” Bergen said, shaking Raylan’s hand and nodding to Tim.

“Judge handed down a duly sworn warrant,” Tim said, “No thanks about it.”

Bergen nodded. “Still. This is a whole different kind of worse compared to the last vampire victim. Even the scent dogs are afraid of the scene.”

Tim nodded. “Normal dogs won’t track most preternatural beings. It’s why we train Trollhounds like Sheeba. Trollhounds and trollhound mixes are the only canine breeds that’ll track ’em.”

“What do you have?” Raylan asked.

“It’s bad,” Bergen said, pointing to the bedroom. “Dead wife. Missing husband and daughter. The scene is a mess.”

“What makes you think it’s a wolf?” Tim asked.

“Husband’s a newly registered lycanthrope—werewolf—and he’s missing,” Bergen said.

Raylan and Tim both groaned.
“What?” Bergen asked.

“How newly registered?” Raylan asked.

“How newly registered?” Bergen asked. “Sad business. The daughter—a minor—was infected at the same time. Family declined to explain how.”

Tim scowled. “So this was the guy’s second or third full moon?”


“How old’s the girl?” Raylan asked.

“Fourteen.”

Tim whistled. “Tough blow.” Being a teenager was bad enough; having to fight the natural human changes of puberty on top of trying to learn control becoming a newly turned lycan would make for some truly miserable teenage years.

“Why do you think that this Walter McCready attacked his wife? Why not the girl?” Tim asked.

“The scene itself,” Bergen answered.

“The wife?” Raylan asked.

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“The scene itself,” Bergen answered.

The hazmat-level of care they were taking with this scene made sense. If there was a lot of blood and her husband or daughter had exposed her to lycanthropy either before or during this attack, then the crime scene itself could infect any of the techs working the scene. There was a lot of debate among emergency personnel and first responders about treating lycanthropes and potentially contamination from human victims.

“Alrighty,” Tim said. “Let’s see the body.”

Bergen pointed to the bedroom. “Be my guest. I’ll let you two come to your own conclusions.”

Tim and Raylan entered and Tim immediately saw why they’d initially ruled out the daughter.

Sally Anne lay prone on the bed, still dressed in some of her lingerie. Claw marks raked her body and tore through the bedding that covered the mattress.

“Oh my word,” Raylan said. “He lost control during sex.”

“Looks like it,” Tim agreed, shaking his head. “What the fuck was he doing having sex the night of a full moon?”

Raylan shrugged. “Could be like Benchely—no one showed him how draw blood through the thigh. Doesn’t seem like the preternatural groups in Harlan have any kind of normal socialization. Jamil was right. They’re skewed and backwards.”

Raylan wandered the room opening drawers and shutting them. “Condoms, lycan-strength,” he muttered. “I’ll take a whiff when I get over there, but I bet she wasn’t lycan. She would have been
able to hold up better or maybe turn and defend herself when he lost control.”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “The question is, where’s the kid?”

“Maybe she took off when her father lost it?” Raylan suggested. “Kids know how to make themselves scarce when they need to.”

Tim eyed his partner, but Raylan just shrugged. He went over to Sally Anne, bent close to her body and breathed in. “The blood smells human, but you can definitely pick up the wolf in the room. On her, on the bed.”

“What’s a good sample to bag for Sheeba?” Tim asked.

Raylan sniffed the claw marks on the body and then the tears into the bedding. “Samples of the bedding. Scent matches the claw marks.”

“You’re gonna put my poor dog out of a job,” Tim said.

They cut the bedding around the claw marks from the bed and then pulled the pillowcase from the bed in Loretta’s room, bagging it too. Outside, Tim and Sheeba tracked Walt McCready’s scent to an abrupt stop near an oil stain in the dirt.

“Looks like he got into a vehicle,” Tim said. “Did you want to get with Tom and put a BOLO out on the vehicle? Probably best if other LEOs call it in and don’t try to approach. No idea what his state of mind is. I’m going to see if Sheeba can get a line on the girl.”

Sheeba and Tim ended up taking off through the backyard of the house, into the woods and circling back to the main road where her scent also abruptly disappeared. They headed back to the house to give Raylan and Bergen the news that Loretta was on the run—and he had no idea if she was with her father or running from him. Either way, he was sure someone had picked her up.

“So you’ve got two dead ends?” Bergen asked.

Tim and Raylan had dumped the protective gear and loaded Sheeba into the backseat of Tim’s truck.

“Maybe not,” Tim said.

“I don’t suppose you have a line on where Boyd Crowder is holding court these days?” Raylan asked.

“Mmm. I haven’t heard. Why?” Bergen asked.

“Because it involves wolves in Harlan County. They’re his animal to call. He might not know where McCready is, but he probably knows someone who does,” Raylan said.

“He was still posting sermons and producing televangelism content,” Tim said. “Rachel was monitoring it. If his church is still operating and collecting money, then I bet the IRS knows the physical location. Call Rachel.”

They found the location of Boyd’s church off highway 421 in the form of an old-fashioned tent revival.

“Holy shit,” Raylan said, taking in the size of the tent with a giant banner inviting one and all to the Modern Eternal Life Church Tent Revival with a giant picture of Boyd smiling and showing just
“I guarantee you there’s nothing holy about it,” Tim said.

Raylan nodded. His partner was right. A holy item in the presence of the number of vampires the tent could hold would be enflame the entire structure.

“How’s he getting away with this?” Tim asked.

“Rachel said the city gave him a permit. He’s good for the economy, they say.” Raylan shook his head.

“How good?”

“Permit is for three thousand,” Raylan answered.

They looked around at the impromptu parking lots surrounding the tent, with chalk lines in the dirt and grass. “Sign says Wednesday and Sunday nights. It’s a Tuesday. What are the chances we’ll run into Boyd if we wait long enough?” Tim said.

“Not sure,” Raylan said, pointing to a motorhome he’d just noticed back and to the side of the lot. “But doesn’t that Alfa with the slide out over there look familiar?”

“Huh. Wynn Duffy.”

“Let’s go see if his muscle is awake.”

Mike stood outside the door of the RV. “You know I can’t let you in. Even if Mr. Duffy was inside. I’m not letting the Executioner and Death in.”

“Are you telling us this isn’t his daytime resting place?” Tim asked.

“I’m not telling you anything.”

“Seeing how Duffy’s ride is idling here at Boyd Crowder’s big fat tent revival, I take it that means he’s acquainted with Boyd. Can you confirm that?” Raylan asked.

Mike nodded tightly.

“Ah, progress. Then you can tell them both we’ll be back around, say, eight o’clock, and we’d like a word.”

“What are Duffy and Boyd doing together?” Tim asked Raylan, as they walked back to his truck.

“No idea, but I guess we’ll find out.”

Tim and Raylan went back to Ava Crowder’s old house. The marshals service wasn’t in any hurry to send it to auction, Art had told them, and that was fine with the chief—it gave his people a place to hole up when they ended up stuck over in Harlan County.

Nothing had shown up on the BOLO for either Walt or Loretta, so after nightfall, they headed back down 421 to Boyd’s tent revival. They were shocked to find the parking lot packed and the tent spilling over with people.

Tim badged his way past local security.
“I thought the sign said Wednesdays and Sundays,” Tim said to the guard. “Where did all these people come from?”

The guard shrugged. “Youth night. Probably five thousand people in there.”

Raylan coughed to cover a curse, then he and Tim shared a significant look. Turning humans under the age of eighteen was strictly against US Federal law. Every year or so, congress debated a new version of the law that upped the age to twenty-one hauling out psychologists and neurologists who’d testify that even in the late teenaged aged, the human brain was still growing and developing. On the flip side, a pro-vampire rights group had been trying to get a test case before the High Court for years, arguing that in terminal medical patients, turning someone as young as sixteen should be allowed if the family agreed. So far the Supreme Court justices had turned a blind eye to the issue.

Tim took the measure of the guard and tried a different tact.

“I thought your permit from the city was for three-thousand,” Tim said.

The guard shifted uncomfortably. “You can drive right on up front through that lane there.” He clearly wanted out of the conversation.

Before Tim’s window rolled shut, Raylan leaned over into his space inhaling.

“The guard is a werewolf,” Raylan said, as they pulled forward.

Raylan, Tim, and Sheeba walked toward the main entrance of the tent after Tim found a spot big enough to park his truck.

“All the guards are wolf, I think,” Raylan said as they approached a greeter welcoming parishioners and checking for holy items. He was clearly the undead from the fanged tips in his smile.

Raylan pulled his badge and Tim watched the vampire’s welcoming smile fade.

“Need to have a word with Boyd,” Raylan said. “Tell him deputy US Marshal Givens and Gutterson are here.”

Tim saw the vampire recognize their names.

“One moment,” he said, pulling another vampire greeter aside and sending her running.

“Someone will be with you in a moment.”

“That’s all right,” Raylan said, taking off after the woman. “We’ll follow her.”

As they trailed the vampire through the tent, eyes turned to watch Tim, Raylan, and especially Sheeba. Tim heard whispers, “What kind of dog is that?”

They followed her around the stage and out of the tent to the back where Duffy’s RV was now parked.

“Shoulda known to just start with Duffy,” Raylan muttered.

“Yep.”

The vampire was standing in the open door asking for Boyd, when Raylan came up behind her and crowded her up the steps.
“Boyd, Duffy, Ava,” Raylan greeted them.

“Raylan Givens, I swear if you are here to even think you can steal another church from me…”

“S’not about the church Boyd,” Raylan said. “But I admit I am curious as to what Wynn Duffy’s doing here. Didn’t realize the two of you were acquainted.”

“Why Marshal Givens, I make it a point to know the most powerful master vampires in the state,” Duffy said, sitting on a white leather couch with his ankle on his knee. He hadn’t moved since Raylan and Tim had pushed the vampire they followed up the stairs and into the RV.

“Mr. Duffy here is my new second-in-command,” Boyd offered.

“I get it now.” Raylan laughed. “That’s where the money for the fancy tent came from.”

“Candy,” Boyd said to the vampire, “you can go back to the tent now.”

She squeezed past Tim, but stopped at Sheeba, who hadn’t made it all the way up the steps. Tim moved further into the motorhome’s space, gave the Trollhound a hand-gesture command to heel next to him, and Candy escaped into the night.

“Where’s your lackey, Duffy? He tell you we wanted a word?” Raylan asked.

“You mean my human servant Mike? He’s taking care of business for us,” Duffy said.

“Is that what you call him?” Raylan asked.


“What was that Ava?” Raylan asked.

“I said you’re a hypocrite. At least Mike works with his master. You don’t do shit for Boyd,” Ava accused.

“Wait a minute…” Duffy said, turning to Boyd, then looking back at Raylan. Raylan felt Duffy’s power push at him, feeling like a cold burn at the Munin seals.

“Duffy, if you want to keep your head, you’ll cease using vampire powers against me immediately. Under the law, a preternatural marshal can and should interpret the unwelcome use of vampiric powers as a threat and justification to put said vampire down where he stands—or in your case sits.”

Duffy’s power faded and he held up his hands in front of him. “Deputy, if I’m not mistaken, you’re carrying two marks.” The blond vampire turned to Boyd. “You made a deputy US Marshal your human servant? But not just any marshal… one with the Executioner’s reputation. When you proposed my joining your organization, you probably should have led with this.”

Raylan clenched his jaw. “I am not part of Boyd’s ‘organization’.”

“How’s that work if he decides you’ve broken one of his many laws?” Duffy asked as if Raylan and Tim weren’t in the room.

“Then we’ll put him down,” Tim said.

“And put down your partner at the same time?” Duffy countered. “I doubt it.”

Boyd shrugged. “Extenuating circumstances,” Boyd answered. He and Raylan stared each other
“Did I mention he’s a necromancer?” Boyd said.

“Jesus Boyd,” Raylan cursed.

“Really? I thought they were all dead,” Duffy said. “This just gets better and better. Marshal, you are an enigma.”

Tim grimaced, the dent in his forehead deep with his displeasure.

“It’s all in the family now, right Marshal?” Duffy asked.

“No, no it isn’t,” Raylan said. “I already have one family member I’ve sent to jail. Don’t think I wouldn’t do the equivalent with Boyd if the situation warranted it.”

“Which brings us to the question of this evening, why are you here Raylan?” Boyd said.

“Had a human death this afternoon, Boyd,” Raylan said.

“Another one?” Boyd sighed.

“Wolf attacked.”

“Then Raylan, what the hell does that have to do with me?”

“Wolves are your animal to call. You have wolves all over your revival tonight working security. If anyone has a line on who we’re looking for, either it’d be you or you’ll know ’em,” Raylan said.

Boyd stood up and tugged his suit vest smoothing it down. “I thought we established a couple weeks back that this is a law-abiding fellowship. Who are you looking for?”

“Walt McCready,” Tim said.

“Never heard of him,” Boyd said. “But I bet Devil has. Let’s go find him.”

Boyd called Devil on his cell phone and told him to meet him at the guard house.

“Say Boyd, we heard this is youth revival night,” Raylan said as they made their way to meet Devil. “You do know that it’s illegal to turn anyone under the age of eighteen.”

“My flock is made of up human and vampire parishioners,” Boyd said.

“And lycans?” Tim asked

Boyd scowled. “Sure, if they’d like to join.”

“Or you just use them as cheap labor?”

Boyd smiled. “That too.”

A fair-haired wolf wearing a security T-shirt passed them and Sheeba started to growl, advancing on him.

“What’s that thing?” the werewolf backed away.

“Sheeba, stand down,” Tim ordered.
“Stephen,” Boyd said as way of greeting.

The blond wolf was shorter than Tim and looked scared. “Do you know Walt McCready?”

Stephen started to back away.

“Stephen, stay here and answer the marshal’s questions,” Boyd ordered.

The wolf didn’t look less scared but his body tightened up and he didn’t move.

“You know Walt McCready?” Tim asked.

“Yes, he’s in the pack.”

“You know his daughter, Loretta?” Raylan asked.

Stephen’s eyes rolled over to Boyd and he nodded.

“Have you been in the presence of either Walt or Loretta McCready in the last few hours?”

Stephen nodded tightly.

About that time Devil jogged up.

“What’s going on Boyd?” Devil eyed Stephen’s stance.

“They’re looking for Walt McCready in connection to a human death. Stephen here has some information,” Boyd said.

“Boyd, how many times I gotta tell you that you can’t just run down the will of my pack—”

“Devil,” Boyd cautioned, his voice low.


“At the Lupinar,” Stephen said. “I saw him there tonight before work. I had to go back for my car. Left it there after the full-moon run last night.”

Devil rubbed the back of his neck. “Shit. What’d he do?”

“Killed his wife. Ran. Maybe hurt his daughter. She’s missing, too.”

Devil shook his head. “He wouldn’t have hurt Loretta. And she’d’ve torn his head off if he tried. She’s probably with the Bennetts.”

“Mags Bennett?” Raylan asked.

“Expect so,” he said.

“Are we finished here?” Boyd asked.

“Just need Devil to accompany us to the Lupinar,” Tim said.

Boyd gave Devil a hard look. “Devil, I expect you to help the marshals serve their warrant on McCready.” He turned and walked back toward the tent revival.

Devil shuddered and sent Boyd a look of hatred.
Tim made Devil ride with up front with him and give them directions to the Lupinar which was nearly all the way back out toward Lynch where they’d started the fugitive hunt. He wanted Raylan sitting behind him in the backseat to keep an eye on the wolf in the passenger seat.

“You shouldn’t even be allowed there,” Devil complained. “It’s our holy place where we go during the full moon.”

“Uh-huh,” Tim said. “Well, we promise not to tell anyone about it.”

Tim turned in where Devil directed him.

“You have your Lupinar in a state park?” Raylan asked, recognizing the name as one of the more prominent parks in the area, known for natural rock formations and views of the Smoky Mountains.

“Ain’t like I picked it,” Devil said. “Place been handed down from Ulfric to Ulfric.”

They hiked to where the Lupinar was located, which wasn’t actually inside the park proper—but near the boundaries.

“Aren’t you afraid that a ranger or campers are going to stumble over your pack during the full moon?” Tim asked.

“Nah,” Devil said with a sneer. “We don’t worry none about that.”

“Seems like it’d be a concern,” Raylan said.

“Seems like it would,” Devil said.

When they got to a clearing, Sheeba started to growl, sensing someone in the darkness before Tim or Raylan could see who it was.

“There’s McCready—on the ritual slab.”

“Sheeba, heel,” Tim ordered, concerned she would bound off after McCready and spook him.

“Walter McCready?” Tim called, as they got close enough to see him sitting on the rock in a pair of tatty sweatpants and no shirt. His shoulders were rounded in defeat, his feet hung off the flat rock slab.

“You the ones who come for me?” McCready asked.

“We’re with the Preternatural division of the US Marshals Service,” Raylan said.

“Did you kill your wife Sally Anne?” Tim countered.

McCready raised his face, broken with emotion to meet Tim’s eyes and nodded.

“Be good if you could say that out loud, Walt,” Tim said.

“I killed her,” McCready said, his voice breaking as he gave in to sobs on the last word. They approached him, satisfied he wasn’t going to run.

“Walter McCready, I’m duly sworn by the United States Federal Court to execute you for the murder
of Sally Anne McCready,” Tim said. Normally, offenders didn’t wait around for him to read them
the writ of execution, but this man had no fight left in him.

His Ulfric did though.

“You don’t have to kill him,” Devil said. “Just tell them he’s dead, and we’ll send him away.”

“We can’t do that Devil,” Tim said.

“Why not? It’s not like they’d ever know up in Lexington.”

“Do you think you’ll ever be able to control yourself in your wolf form, Mr. McCready?” Raylan
asked.

The man shook his head. “This was never somethin’ I was meant to be.” McCready’s eyes shifted to
Devil then back down.

Tim pulled his weapon. “One more question. Where’s Loretta?” Tim asked.

McCready looked up to meet Tim’s eyes for the first time. “Ain’t she at the Bennetts?”

Raylan nodded. “We expect she is—just haven’t checked there yet.”

“She’d go there. We came from Bennett County,” he said, again he eyed Devil without meeting the
Ulfric’s face.

“I lied… another question,” Tim said. “Why here?”

“This is the Lukoi death place,” McCready said, simply, as if it were obvious.

Raylan stepped forward toward the slab. When he got close enough to it, he laid his palms flat to the
rock and hummed off-tune notes. “Death magic. And lots of it. Whoa,” Raylan said. “What is this
place?”

Devil shrugged. “It’s our Lupinar. Our death place.”

Raylan palmed the slab again, taking a deep breath. Devil’s head tilted as he watched the
necromancer.

“What are you doing?” Devil growled at Raylan, slowly advancing on Raylan. “And why do you
smell like a lupa?”

Raylan pulled his weapon, and Tim turned his gun on Devil.

“I ain’t gay but you smell better than my mate,” Devil muttered, still moving closer to Raylan as if he
were entranced.


Devil didn’t seem to hear him so Tim pulled off a shot just behind the Ulfric’s footsteps, which got
his attention.

“Not yours.” Tim ground out.

“I could have shot him myself, Tim,” Raylan said.
“Raylan, leave the death magic alone. It messes with the werewolf.”
Tim turned to McCready. “Any last words, Walt?”
“I’m sorry. Tell Loretta I’m sorry,” he whispered. “And one more thing?”
“What’s that?” Tim asked
“You’ll protect her?”
“No,” Devil gasped.
“Sure,” Tim said.
McCready relaxed. “You promise?”
Tim felt the emotion empty from him. “I will,” he promised, then he plugged one silver bullet between Walt McCready’s eyes and two more in his heart.
“You offered her protection,” Devil said as if he was accusing Tim of a terrible slight.
“I did. And you better expect I’ll deliver it.”
Devil growled softly, staring at Tim. “I’m going to kill you myself one day.”
Tim smiled. “You can try.”
“Oh, I will,” Devil blustered.
“Why did you bring us here Devil? Was it because Boyd made you?” Tim asked.
“You know it was.”
“Because the wolf is his animal to call. What I don’t understand is why you, as Ulfric, couldn’t just shake him off? Is he that powerful or are you that weak?” Tim pushed.
“You asshole. I’m gonna—”
Raylan interrupted. “All right. All right. First things first, we need to figure out how to get McCready’s body out of here—or call in the authorities to take him to the morgue.”
“No!” Devil interjected. “No authorities. And the Lukoi, we take care of our own. Do you need the body?”
Tim shook his head, and Raylan answered, “Not really.”
“Then y’all go on. I’ll take care of him as pack, according to custom.”
Tim, Raylan, and Sheeba started hiking back when they heard the sounds of Devil shifting, bones cracking and the wet splash of fluid hitting the leaf cover on the ground. Soon after, they heard the tearing of flesh.
“Is he eating…?” Tim asked,
“I think so…” Raylan turned and looked back, his high cheekbones tight in concentration. “I think that’s why the death magic is so strong there… why the Munin Marianne used felt like so many dead.”
“Why?”

“Because the Munin is so many dead. If the pack consumes each of their dead, generation after generation… the pack spirit becomes a giant mob of death magic rolled up and added onto with every death.”

***

The drive over to Bennett County took them a good hour; they didn’t pull up to the Bennett house until nearly midnight.

“This could go either way. Best to just let me do the talking,” Raylan said as they sat in the front of the house, looking at the mostly dark windows. A light was on toward the back of the house and two upstairs windows softly illuminated the darkness.

Raylan knocked and Mags Bennett came to the door in her dressing gown.

“US Marshals, ma’am,” Raylan said, his hat in hand. “We’re here about the whereabouts of a Loretta McCready.”

“I know damned well who you are Raylan Givens,” she said. “And I know both your mama and your Aunt Helen taught you better than to come knockin’ on some old lady’s door past a decent hour.”

Raylan tipped his head. “Mrs. Bennett, I’m awful sorry. It’s just since she’s a minor and missing, we need to follow all leads. Her late father—”

“Did you say late?” Mags interrupted.

“Mags, can we come in and have a word?”

She sighed. “It’s probably for the best.”

Tim didn’t know if she meant Walt McCready’s death or them coming in to have a word.

Nonetheless, Mags pushed the screen door open for Raylan, and Tim followed him in. They’d decided to leave Sheeba in the backseat of the truck. It was cool enough and would probably make what they had to say go easier. Besides, from Marianne, he’d learned the Bennetts themselves were Lukoi. He didn’t want to get any of the family riled up more than necessary.

Mags led them back to a sitting room and waved at a couch with a loud flower pattern in blues and tans. She sank down into a chair and rocked slowly.

“The girl’s here,” Mags said. “But she’s sleeping. You two aim to take her from me?”

Tim watched Raylan’s eyebrows rise. “Mags, let’s cut to the chase,” Raylan said. “You know I been workin’ with Marianne.”

“I heard tell,” she said.

“You know what my family is and I know what your family is,” Raylan said. “Deputy Gutterson here, he’s in the loop too.”

“Heard ’bout that one,” Mags said, nodding at Tim, but her eyes glinted in a not quite friendly manner.
“What’d you hear about me?” Tim said.

“Oh, just that you and Raylan here are… close.” She drew out the last word like its meaning was dirty.

“Then you heard right,” Raylan said evenly.

Mags nodded.

“How’d yer daddy take that news?” she asked.

“Don’t know. Never asked him since it ain’t none of his business,” Raylan said. “Figure he’s probably more pissed off that I’m a deputy marshal and helped put him in jail than he is about my boyfriend.”

Mags shrugged, then snorted. “Lord, you take after your mama in so many ways.”

“How’d you mean?” Raylan asked.

“Well, you know about the Bennetts and the Grants going back, don’t you?” she asked.

Raylan sighed. “I know there was bad blood between the families.”

“That there was recent,” she said, “and all on your daddy, not the Grants.”

“Not surprising.”

Mags smiled. “Arlo always was a handful. But your mama had to have him.”

“What?” Raylan sounded surprised.

“For longer than anyone can remember, been the custom that a Grant baby girl with the gift—like your kind of gift of raisin’ and communin’ with the dead—that a Grant girl with that gift would marry the next Bennett in line to be Ulfric.”

“Say again,” Raylan said.

“You heard me. Arranged marriages between the Grants and the Bennetts. Always been that way until Frances fell... in... love,” Mags said, emphasizing the words. “She was supposed to marry my Davis but she weren’t having it. Said she was going to marry for love,” Mags said, conspiratorially. “Never heard this before, have ya?”

“Can’t say as I have,” Raylan concurred.

“Don’t surprise me none,” Mags said. “I bet your aunt Helen never told you before he married your mama, Arlo was her sweetheart. Oh, that was a scandal. But it’s all settled now. For the best. If your mama hadn’t followed her heart, I’d never have had my boys, my pack.” Mags voice turned steely.

“I didn’t know you dabbled in animation Mags,” Raylan said.

“Oh, I don’t mess with that death magic,” she said. “But I come from a long line of granny witches myself.”

Tim eyed her more closely.

“I’m just a retired grandma now,” she said.
“Except for the other family business,” Raylan said.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mags said primly.

“Yeah you do,” Raylan said. “But really Mags, we’re just here to see to Loretta. I know she’s sleeping, but we got to see her and make sure she’s whole and healthy. And we got to deliver news to her about her mama and daddy. Officially.”

“She knows her mama’s gone,” Mags said. “And she’ll know that means her daddy wasn’t far behind. But you need to leave her here with her people.”

“I thought she was part of the Harlan pack,” Tim said. “Wouldn’t that mean she’d go back with them?”

“Well, you thought wrong,” Mags ground out. “You know how Loretta came down with the family strain? It wasn’t ‘cause we infected her.”

“How was it then?” Raylan asked.

“Under Bo, that Harlan pack—they did terrible things with young women, perverted things. Worse than the two of you.”

Tim heard Raylan take a deep breath before asking the next question.

“What kind of things, Mags? What’d they do to Loretta?”

“One of their pack was a child sex pervert—he stole her away to make a dirty movie for Bo Crowder. Their pack is so weak—they’re not shored up with a strong lupa, and they just roll over and do what the vampires tell ’em to. And her daddy—he tried, bless his soul—but when he tried to save her, they clawed him up real bad. Now he killed that wolf that took her and defiled her, eventually, but not before both he and Loretta ended up Lukoi.”

Tim waited for Raylan to follow-up but he seemed to be processing the information.

“You said the Harlan pack isn’t shored up. What did you mean by that?” Tim asked.

“That’s your question after I tell you that poor girl’s sordid tale?” Mags accused.

“It is,” Tim said.

Mags looked at Raylan with pointed disapproval of his partner.

“That’s partly why the Bennets and the Grants always paired up. Keeps the vampires from runnin’ roughshod over the whole pack.”

“I didn’t know that,” Raylan said.

“Your mama really never told you nothin’, did she?” Mags commented.

“She taught me to raise the dead,” Raylan offered.

“But not how to master it.”

“Whatever my mama’s failings, she did her best,” Raylan said. “Now Mags, we really do need to see the girl.”
“I’ll get her, but you can’t take her back to that Harlan pack or give her to the state. You know the kind of facility they’ll put an underage werewolf in,” Mags said.

And Tim knew she was right. When a human was diagnosed with lycanthropy, they had the option of government-run facilities to help manage their transitions. Most of the people who went into those facilities didn’t come back out. Ever.

Mags disappeared up the stairs and came back with a lanky brunette, a scrap of a young girl.

“You come to tell me my daddy’s dead, too?” she said, eyeing Raylan and then Tim.

“Loretta McCready?” Raylan asked.

But Tim knew it was her. She had her father’s features but more determination and will than the man could have ever hoped to possess.

“I am. Which one of you done it? Mags said you’re federals. They’re the ones that put down weres and vampires who’ve gone wrong.”

Tim and Raylan exchanged a long look. Rayan seemed as unsure as Tim felt about how to proceed. Then, Loretta took turns sizing them up and took matters into her own hands.

“You.” She pointed to Tim. “You’re the one, right?”

Tim nodded. “I did it. He made me promise to tell you he was sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Figures.”

“And he asked me to protect you,” Tim added.

Mags gasped.

“I’m under your protection?” Loretta whispered.

Tim’s eyes slid to Mags, then back to Loretta. “Yeah, you are.”

Loretta nodded, looking satisfied. “How’d you kill him?”

“Silver bullets. One between the eyes. Two in the heart—one for your mother, one for you.”

For the first time that night, the little girl looked like she might cry.

***

Mags sent Loretta back to bed and walked Raylan and Tim out.

“You know to a lycan that her being under your protection means that you’ll fight for her if there’s a challenge?” Mags asked Tim.

“Yeah,” Tim lied. He hadn’t known but it wouldn’t do anyone any good to go back on the promise now.
Mags nodded as if she understood as well.

“Marianne told me about your plight,” she then said to Raylan.

“What plight?” Raylan asked.

“Bein’ bound to Boyd,” Mags said. “You know that endangers all the wolves in this part of Kentucky?”

“How so?” Tim said.

“A pack like ours, normally, we’re protected from a master vampire who can call wolves. That’s why the Grants been marrying into the Bennett family for generations. Keeps the packs from falling into the hands of the vampires. But since you got yourself paired with a vampire instead of Lukoi—even with the likes of Marianne mated with Doyle, Boyd Crowder could still call our wolves with a necromancer as his human servant. It’d be in your best interest, Raylan, to find a way to separate yourself from Boyd Crowder,” Mags said. “One way or another.”

She turned and went back into the house, turning off the porchlight.

“Was that a threat?” Tim asked.

“I do believe it was,” Raylan replied. He then looked at his partner. “You know, for a man who says he isn’t all that into women, you sure do a fine job of collecting them.”

“How do you mean?”

“Let’s see…” Raylan began ticking off his fingers as he recited names. “Nahtoo, or was Sheeba first? Probably Sheeba. Then Nahtoo and the harpies—you got three in that set, then my ex-wife, and there could be two for one there—too soon to tell, and now Loretta McCready. You sure you don’t got something to tell me?”

Tim rolled his eyes. “I’m gay.”

“No question there.” Raylan agreed. “You know, though, for a stone-cold killer, you have an awful soft heart.”

Chapter End Notes

A shout-out to MrsRidcully for reminding me that even the best dogs can be a little bit bad. xxox

You might have noticed, I have a chapter count on “Three in the Day” now! A couple more chapters and this we’re onto the last book! Yay! We’re coming up on the plot crisis and I am just, so, excited, about that.

I want to thank everyone for reading, commenting, kudo-ing and following along as this fic progresses. Y'all are great and I appreciate all of you.

xxox

I finally fixed the Tumblr blog I made to put my headcanon in... I created it like in August and then password protected it so no one but me could see it: Do'oh. I still tag
for shit but if you hang there, feel free to drop me a line.
[http://cher-locked.tumblr.com/ or http://mouth-of-this-holler.tumblr.com/]
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: canon typical violence

As always thank you to Jonjo for beta-reading and for letting me bounce plot points off her. xxox

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Around the middle of December, Art pulled Tim into his office.

“I got a call from the Northern District of California. They’re putting together a tactical op and need a PSOG deputy who’s a sniper and can track. Your name came up.”

Tim had been surprised he hadn’t been called out before now. Prior to his assignment in Kentucky, he’d bounced around from tactical op to tactical op.

“Since everything’s pretty quiet here, I couldn’t really say no when they called for you,” Art explained. “Sucks this close to the holidays.”

Tim shrugged. This was the job. He and Raylan both knew that. “What’s the situation?” Tim asked.

“They’ve got a rogue master vamp in San Francisco in cahoots with a group of weresnakes,” Art said.

Tim shuddered.

“The city master is cooperating,” Art added.

Tim perked up. “Really? Not taking care of it on their own? Vamp politics being what they are.”

“Guess not.” Art shook his head. “Getting the Marshals Service to clean up the mess.”

“What do you wanna bet someone will take that city master out less than a month after we clean house?”

“No bet.”

Tim half-laughed. It was the catch-22 for the vampires running territories. If they took care of uprisings on their own, they risked breaking the law. If they let the preternatural division of the Marshals Service step in, then they were seen as weak.

“When do I need to go?”

“Flight out tonight for you and Sheeba. Check your e-mail for the details. You and Raylan want to take off now, get your ducks in a row before you leave?” Art asked softly.

Tim understood the chief was offering them some time together before they parted for who knew how long.
“Thanks Art.”

***

Tim pulled his packs out of the back of the truck that evening. They’d had to leave for the Blue Grass Airport early so he had time to deal with checking his weapons through, not to mention negotiate with security and Sheeba. Airlines always wanted to put her in a kennel in cargo. He’d be damned if his K-9 deputy marshal was riding in a cage with the luggage.

Raylan had sauntered around the truck coming up behind him, handing him a bag, watching. His partner was still sufficiently mussed—his hair standing on end from where Tim had his hands buried in it earlier. After a shower, Tim still felt the imprint of Raylan on his skin, inside his body, not to mention the oddly satisfying ache in his backside when he turned this way or that. He didn’t want to get on a plane and leave Raylan.

Tim had packed and left on special ops many times without a backward glance at Peter for years. He’d even walked away from Raylan a few times when they’d first started working together. This dread of separation was new—like the ache of missing Raylan he’d felt a month earlier.

“Drive my truck while I’m gone,” Tim said. It wasn’t a question.

“I think that’s a country song.”

“Only if I die.”

“Then, don’t die.” Raylan’s tone dropped the playful out of their banter.

“Don’t plan to.” Tim pushed into Raylan’s space and kissed him chastely. “You know where all the gun caches are, right?”

Raylan rolled his eyes. “I remember from the first three times you showed me.”

Tim nodded.

“Truck’s safer than those piece-of-shit Town Cars Art assigns you.”

“I keep telling you they’re posh rides.”

Tim rolled his eyes.

“Drive it for me anyway,” Tim said.

Raylan nodded. “I’ll see you when I see you.”

***

Raylan’s turn at missing Tim was less forgiving.

He discovered a thousand little things his partner just magically made happen that Raylan had somehow never noticed. The upsetting part for him was that he didn’t realize it himself; it took Winona yelling it at him for him to clue in.

Raylan climbed the steps up to the kitchen one night almost a week after Tim and Sheeba had been gone.

“Where the hell were you today?” Winona demanded.
Raylan shifted his head as if he were looking behind him to see who she was hollering at. He’d had no plans to meet his ex that day.

Winona shook her head at what must have been a blank look on his face. “You don’t even know what I’m talking about, do you?”

“Honestly, no.” Raylan pulled his hat off and dropped it upside down on the dining room table.

“The ultrasound they scheduled at the last prenatal appointment?” Winona offered.

“That was today?” Raylan asked, his brow furrowed.

“I put it on the schedule that…” she drifted off.

“Tim set up.” Raylan finished. “Yeah, maybe you noticed, he’s not here at the moment.”

Winona shook her head. “You only showed up to the first prenatal appointment because he made you.”

Raylan shrugged. “Reminded me. He doesn’t have to make me. It’s my kid—I care, too. Did you find out the sex?”

It turned out that sonograms weren’t covered with prenatal care by Winona’s insurance. They’d had to schedule a special appointment.

Winona half-laughed. “You’re right on that count. It is your kid. Evasive as all hell. Every angle they tried, the baby seemed to be shifting away.”

“You can’t blame me for that,” Raylan said.

“I’m pregnant. I can blame you for whatever I want,” Winona countered.

“Fair enough.”

She handed him a black-and-white sonogram image. “You owe me three hundred bucks.”

Raylan pulled out his wallet and peeled off some bills that he handed over to her. “It cost that much?”

“Hmm-mmm,” she said, taking the money. “Thanks.”

Raylan took the photo from her and turned the picture one way, then another. “I think he’s got Tim’s nose.” He slid it under a magnet on the fridge with the phone number to the vet they’d taken Sheeba to when she’d hurt her eye.

“Hush,” Winona snorted. “You’re such a dick. Ever consider she might be a she?”

Raylan sighed. The last thing he wanted was a girl after hearing Mags’ tales of how the women in his line had been forced into marriage with the Bennett clan. “I would deserve that.”

“You would.”

***

Raylan picked up a call from Tim a couple days before Christmas.
“Hey, I didn’t think I’d hear from you today,” Raylan said.

“Are you free to come get me at the airport?” Tim asked, all business.

“Mmm. Sure,” Raylan started. “Did you finish up out there?”

“No,” Tim said. “I pulled out early.”


“I’ll take that as a no. When’s your flight get in?”

“We’re already in waiting at baggage claim,” Tim said. “We’ll be out front by the time you get here.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’ll explain when you get here,” Tim said. “Just watch your back.”

Raylan pulled up to the terminal where Tim was seated on a bench with his bags around him and Sheeba at his feet.

“What the hell is going on?” Raylan double-parked and unlocked the cover on the truck bed.

“Let’s get this loaded and I’ll explain it on the way home,” Tim said. He opened the rear-passenger-side door to let Sheeba in the back of the crew cab. “Hey where’s the seat cover?”

“Laundry room. I washed it while you were gone,” Raylan said, transferring Tim’s bags into the truck. “Didn’t expect you back.”

Tim held out his hand.

“What?”

“Keys.”

Raylan’s head fell back as if Tim had hit him. “Oh come on. Been drivin’ it since you left. Not even a scratch.”

“I know. But don’t want you to freak out when I tell why I had to come home,” Tim said.

“I can handle myself behind the wheel,” Raylan said.

“Not as well as me.”

“Fuck it.” Raylan handed him the keys. “Not getting into a pissing match with you,” he mumbled getting into the passenger side.

Tim started the truck and pulled away from the terminal, eyes circling the mirrors and the road in front of him.

“I’ve been a deputy marshal for twenty years, Tim. I’m a safe driver,” Raylan said.

Tim snorted. “Unless there’s a phone or an ice cream cone in the immediate vicinity.”

“Which there aren’t.” Raylan didn’t argue Tim’s point. “So what the hell is going on?”

“Thomas got a job offer this morning.”
“Who?” Raylan was confused.

“*Thomas*?” Tim reiterated. “You *do* remember me telling you about my cover?”

“Oh, right. Thomas,” Raylan said, frowning at his partner. “Wait a minute, you told me you’d retired Thomas. Doesn’t Thomas kill people for a living?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” Tim said, exasperated. “I got an offer this morning—a very lucrative offer—on a contract for Boyd Crowder’s life.”

“Shit. No way,” Raylan said. “Maybe you should take it.”

“Raylan—you know if someone takes him out, they’ll take you with him.”

“Maybe.”

“No maybe about it,” Tim said. “Besides—the contract had a second name on it—yours.”

Raylan blinked. “You get these offers very often?”

Tim rolled his eyes. “No, not often. But after I stepped in for Nahtoo, I got one or two. Did you hear what I just told you?”

“Were you really in California on marshal business?” Raylan asked, experiencing a sinking feeling. It would not be the first time he’d fallen in love with someone who took the law lightly.

“Jesus Raylan,” Tim said, sounding hurt. “Art sent me. You know that.”

“Sorry. It’s just…” Raylan wasn’t sure how to dig himself out of that one so he went for broke. “I have history of shitty taste in women. And maybe men. Wouldn’t be the first time I ended up entangled with someone of questionable moral fiber.”

Tim checked his mirror and merged onto the highway. “The last thing you need to worry about right now is my moral fiber. What we need to think about is who is trying to kill you?”

“Well, who made the offer?” Raylan asked.

“Don’t know,” Tim said. “It’s a double-blind setup that’ll take a while for me to work back through to get to a name.”

“I can understand hitting Boyd,” Raylan said, “but who would want to kill me?”

“I can’t imagine,” Tim replied wryly. “But we have to look into it.”

“Of course. Though protecting Boyd Crowder’s gonna rub against the grain a bit.”

“I didn’t take it, the hit yet, but someone will if I don’t,” Tim said. “I’ll accept it in the morning, then we might be able to buy ourselves some time before the contractor gets impatient and outsources the job when they don’t see me acting on it. Maybe the holidays’ll help buy some time. The wire transfer for my up-front fee will give me a place to start digging, too—but odds are the holidays will fuck that up with banks closed ‘til Tuesday.”

“Okay, what are we telling Art?”
“The truth, I guess,” Tim said, then winced. “Or part of it?”

“Which part we leaving out? The part where I’m Boyd Crowder’s human servant or the part where you used to moonlight as a contract killer.”

“Probably both those parts,” Tim said defensively. “And I worked for the government, technically. Mostly.”

“Oh-huh. So, we’re really not telling Art anything?”

“No much,” Tim said.

Raylan groaned. “That’ll go over well.”

“Do you know if Winona is at the house?”

“I think she had court today. Then, she’s off until next week.”

“We’ll go check in with Art and make sure she makes it home,” Tim said.

“Wait a minute,” Raylan said, sounding concerned for the first time. “The contract was on Boyd and me—not her.”

“She’s pregnant with your child.”

“Yeah, that’s my concern.”

“It makes her a vulnerability for you,” Tim said, then amended. “Us.”

Raylan turned wide eyes on him, which Tim caught in brief glances across the truck. He slipped his hand across the console to rest it on Raylan’s thigh. “How come when one of us comes home we never get to have that ‘fall into each other’s arms’ moment?”

Raylan seemed to consider him as if he wasn’t sure what he was looking at. “I didn’t think you went in for the schmaltzy romantic crap.”

“I don’t,” Tim admitted. “But a kiss and ‘hi I missed you’ might be nice for a change.”

He listened to his lover swallow a laugh. “I missed you, Tim.”

“Me too Ray.”

***

Tim, Raylan, and Sheeba strolled into the office.

“What the hell are you doing here Gutterson?” Art barked.

“We need a word, boss,” Raylan said.

Art met Raylan’s grave look.

“Is this about Boyd Crowder?” Art asked.

Tim shrugged and Raylan said, “Partly.”

“Maybe you better hear this article Rachel found on Boyd Crowder.”
“What article?” Tim asked.


She read the title. “Vampire Church Sweeps Bible Belt, Spurs Political Uprising.”

“Great,” Tim muttered.

“In the Southern Bible Belt, a part of the country where church attendance is higher than any other in the US, an unlikely figure is filling the pews this holiday season,” Rachel read.

“Go on,” Raylan said, waving his hand.

“Vampire Master Boyd Crowder opened the Modern Eternal Life Church in Harlan, Kentucky this fall catering to both vampires and humans alike. Mr. Crowder’s church first gained popularity in the old mining town turned vampire tourist destination, then spread to the surrounding Appalachian communities through his aggressive TV and online evangelism that is now appealing to the entire Bible Belt,” Rachel read.

“Tell us something we don’t know,” Tim said.

“Just wait a sec,” Rachel said. “It gets bet—”

“Can you just send me the link?” Raylan interrupted, leaning over to log into his computer.

“Oh fine. You two are no fun.”

A few minutes later, Raylan’s e-mail pinged and Tim leaned over his shoulder to steal the mouse, clicking open the link. They both read for a moment.

Tim pointed to a line and read it aloud.

“The Chicago City Master Augustine said what Mr. Crowder is doing by blood-oathing his vampire parishioners is creating a new territory and a potentially formidable power base. ‘If Crowder manages to convert a wide number of vampires in the Bible Belt, he could end up becoming one of the most powerful vampire masters in the Eastern US,’ Mr. Augustine said. ‘He’ll be a power for any area master to reckon with.’”

“Shit,” Raylan said. “Now why would Auggie go and say something like that? If it wasn’t already open season on Boyd, it is now.”

“Maybe that’s what he wanted,” Tim said. “Auggie’s always had mob connections. This way he can let the competition take Boyd out before he ever becomes his problem.”

“It might be working,” Raylan said.

“Geez, you two gossip about vampires like old biddies,” Rachel said.

Tim’s face scrunched up at her comment.

“Don’t miss the part about how the Marshals Service and the US attorney are abusing Boyd’s First Amendment rights by illegally holding his church,” Art added.

“That’s the least of our problems,” Tim said. “Rachel, you want in on this?”
She nodded and they headed into Art’s office.

***

Tim started to try to explain their situation while Raylan took a few minutes to track down Winona and make sure she turned up to their office before she attempted to leave for the day. By the time Raylan got back, Tim had found trying to convince Art they had a problem without telling him how they knew or why the problem existed wasn’t going all that well.

“So you just walked out of a special ops assignment while it was on-going to haul ass home,” Art said. “To tell me that there’s a contract out on Boyd Crowder’s life, but you can’t tell me how you came by this information. Does that about sum it up?”

“Just about,” Tim replied. “Would a reliable source or confidential informant be enough for you?”

“You know it’s not. I’ve got to smooth things over with my boss and justify… what? Are you telling me this so we can put someone on Boyd to protect him? How do you know this isn’t more vampire political bullshit? Especially after that newspaper story hanging Crowder in the wind?”

“It’s all I can tell you. It’s classified.”

“Classified.” Art chewed on that for a few minutes. “Hold that thought. We’re gonna come back to this. Just you and me. Because you either work for me or you don’t.”

Rachel didn’t look happy at that.

Tim shook his head. “S’not going to make it any less classified.”

Raylan barged into office without knocking.

“I caught her. Rearden wasn’t happy with me for horning in, but he likes me well enough he didn’t hold me in contempt,” Raylan said. “Or fire Winona.”

“What’s up with Winona?” Art asked.

“Mmmm…” Raylan looked to Tim.

“I got as far as the contract on Boyd.” Tim waved a hand in explanation.

Art folded his arms across his chest. “Sounds like you need to get a little further there, Deputy,” the chief said.

“The contracted hit was for two. Boyd Crowder and Raylan,” Tim said.

“The hell. I get why someone would want to kill Boyd, but why Raylan?” Art said.

Tim shrugged. “Don’t know yet.”

Rachel shifted in her chair, studying her fingernails.

“I’m looking into my source and we’ll start trying to figure out who’s got motive,” Tim said.

Rachel stared at Tim. “So how do you want to run this? What is the preternatural division’s stance when vampires want to kill each other?” Rachel asked.

“When it’s vampires, we let them sort it out between themselves, unless they take humans with
them,” Raylan said. “But we don’t know where this is coming from. Could be humans ordering the hit, which means we have a dog in that fight. Like when Boyd’s Humans First group was causing problems in Harlan. We at least have the responsibility to let Boyd know what’s coming. And it wouldn’t hurt to see who he thinks both he and I pissed off enough to kill us.”

“Could be the Bennett woman,” Tim offered.

“The one who took in the teenaged werewolf?” Art asked.

“Yeah, she didn’t like… Boyd much,” Tim said. “And wasn’t crazy about Raylan’s animation powers.”

Rachel stared at Tim, then shook her head.

“What Rachel?” Art asked.

She frowned at Tim. “Oh, I can just see the Christmas I promised my nephew flying out the window with guard duty.” Her eyes slid to Raylan, weighing his reaction.

“I don’t need…” Raylan said.

“Your wife does,” Rachel said.

“Ex-wife.”

“Just tonight probably,” Tim said. “I called in some backup who should be in town soon—maybe by tonight.”

“You did what?” Art nearly shouted.

Tim was calm. “I called in backup. A preternatural deputy marshal can deputize backup when they’re on a case or believe there’s imminent danger. What we hunt calls for special talent that you can’t always find in local law enforcement.”

“Who says you’re on a case?”

“I do.”

“No, Gutterson, I do,” Art stood up. “Or don’t. Rachel, you and Raylan please step out. Tim and I need to have a frank conversation.”

“But there’s imminent danger to—” Tim tried again.

“Is there really?” Art cut him off. “You two, out.” Art waved his thumb at the door.

Rachel stood and stalked out. Raylan made his way more slowly, stopping by Tim. “Tell him about Thomas.”

Tim shook his head.

“Just the basics,” Raylan whispered, his mouth near Tim’s ear. Then, Raylan met his eyes for a weighted look. “You can trust him. And if you don’t, he’s going to ground you.”

“Raylan, get out of here.” Art’s tone indicated he’d reached the end of his patience.

“I’m going.”
What Raylan wasn’t expecting was Rachel’s rampage.

On the Friday before Christmas weekend, the office was quiet and empty aside from Nelson filing paperwork at his desk. Rachel corralled Raylan into the break room.

“What the hell are you two hiding?” Rachel demanded, her voice low and sharp to avoid Nelson’s attention. “You been hiding something since Halloween and either you tell me what’s really going on or I’m going to march right back in there and tell Art that Tim was lying. Probably is still lying.”

“He wasn’t lying.”

“He just wasn’t telling the truth either.”

“No, he wasn’t.”

“Raylan, what is so bad you can’t tell Art or even me?”

He took a deep breath, debating for another round in his head whether or not to let her in. Finally, he decided that if he didn’t, she’d just force the issue and he’d have to tell both her and Art. “The reason I lived when Bo Crowder died wasn’t because Tim resuscitated me. Boyd put two marks on me—made me his human servant.”

“Oh Raylan,” she said, sounding sympathetic. He guessed her following silence meant she was sorting out what she’d known of him for the last few months. “You’re compromised.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. Tim, too.”

“No. No, no, no, no,” Raylan said. “I found a way to block Boyd Crowder out for the time being. And Tim and I are still looking for a way to break the vampire-human servant bond.” Or they had been.

Rachel squinted at him. “I do have this straight, don’t I? If Boyd Crowder dies, you die, right? How can you hold his feet to the fire when you’ll just be singin’ your own boots?”

“I can. I have.”

She shook her head. “You were on part of a team that took possession of his church. You hunted down a vampire, but Boyd killed him. Is that why you didn’t shoot Boyd down where he stood, because you couldn’t?”

Raylan opened his mouth to answer, then just shook his head. “You’re gonna see it how you want to, I guess.”

He felt a little ashamed at the disappointed fall of her face. “This goes up the chain, they’ll kick you out of Kentucky if they don’t fire you altogether,” Rachel said.

“If they do, we’ll both quit. Leave Kentucky anyway.”

“You’d do that?”

“It’s easier the farther away from him I am,” Raylan said.
Rachel raised one eyebrow seeming confused. “Boyd?”

“Not Tim.” Raylan frowned.

“Just making sure I’m clear on this,” she said. “Wait a minute. You asshole. All those control exercises with Nahtoo before you left for New Mexico. Those were about this bond, weren’t they? Don’t you even try to lie to me about this, Raylan Givens.”

He winced. “They were.”

“You used me,” she said, her voice giving away her hurt feelings. “You could have told me.”

“And then at some point, you would have been in a position where you felt like you needed to tell Art. We didn’t tell anyone we absolutely didn’t have to,” Raylan said. “Wait a minute. I don’t think Boyd even told anyone until real recently.”

“Is Tim telling Art about this now?” Rachel asked.

“No,” Raylan said. “He’s trying to explain his… um confidential informant to Art.”

“I told you not to lie to me,” Rachel repeated succinctly.

“I’m not lying,” he said. “It’s not my tale to tell, and it really is classified.”

“Then how come you know?” Rachel asked.

Raylan’s eyes scanned her face and he finally just shrugged. “He’s my mate.”

Rachel eyes widened for a moment. “I didn’t realize you two thought of it that way.”

“Really?” Raylan was surprised by that sentiment from her of all people. He would have thought that Rachel would be more attuned to their emotions than even they were. Then he wondered if he needed to be concerned that the empath they worked with more days than not every week didn’t know his lover was more than a lover. Was he assuming too much of the relationship?

She shrugged. “Tim can be incredibly guarded. And you’re a stoic son of a bitch when you want to be. I guess mates fit. It’s more of a preternatural term than human, though.”

Raylan didn’t disagree. “Just no other way to think of it.”

***

Not long after, Art called them into the conference room.

Tim had a white board rolled out and a marker in hand.

“Everything all right?” Raylan asked looking between the two of them.

“As much as can be expected,” Art said, eyeing Tim.

Tim shrugged, scrawling the names “Boyd” and “Raylan” across the top of the board. “We came to an understanding,” Tim said. “And have a loose plan.”

“What’s that?” Rachel asked, taking a chair at the table.

“Raylan’s right that we have a responsibility to inform Boyd Crowder of the threat and offer him
protection. Tim’s looking into the veracity of the ‘confidential informant’ so until we know if it is human or another vampire power struggle, we won’t push protection on Crowder unless he wants it. Let’s face it. Most master vampires have better resources for protecting themselves than we can offer.”

“Fair point,” Raylan said.

“You and yours are another matter. Don’t suppose you talked to your daddy since Vasquez set him free?”

“Nope. And don’t plan to either.”

“So, he’s not a weak spot?”

“Not in terms of a contract hit,” Tim said.

“Hey,” Raylan interrupted.

“Am I wrong?” Tim asked.

Raylan narrowed his eyes at Tim and didn’t reply.

“Take Rachel with you to Harlan,” Art said. “We’ll send Nelson to your place tonight until… what’s his name.. gets here.”

“Bernardo Spotted Horse.”

“And you say he’s a preternatural marshal out of Wyoming?” Art said.

“Cheyenne office. Worked with him before he joined the Marshals Service,” Tim said.

Art groaned.

Raylan felt a spot of concern. The time period before the Marshals Service with Tim could be anything from military to mercenary. “With the Rangers?” Raylan asked.

“And Harley’ll be in tomorrow,” Tim said, ignoring Raylan.

“Who’s Harley?” Raylan asked.

“What office is he out of?” Art asked.

“He’s not.”

“God dammit Gutterson, I told you I’d accept the first—”

“Art, it’s my decision. Or Raylan’s. The way the law is written preternatural division marshals are allowed to use any and all force, including deadly, if we think that a civilian or an LEO is in imminent and life-threatening danger. Case law allows that any LEO or ‘others acting in a backup capacity’ to use the same force, same policy.”

Art turned to Raylan who shrugged.

“There’s only two of us from the preternatural division on the ground in Kentucky, Art, and I’m one of the targets. Winona’s pregnant and eventually Boyd’s going to want us to cover his back,” Raylan said. “And Rachel wants to have Christmas with her nephew.”
“Raylan, I would have—” Rachel started.

“I know. So, come with us tonight instead. Tell me if Mags Bennett is lying when I ask her if she’s trying to kill me. And if Boyd knows who the hell took out this hit,” Raylan said to her. “Then Tim’s backup can cover us so you can have your holiday.”

***

They pulled up to the house in Ford in a caravan: Tim and Raylan, followed by Rachel driving with Winona in her car and Nelson bringing up the rear.

Parked in front of the house was a sedan—clearly a rental—with a tall man rummaging through the truck. He looked Native American.

Raylan’s eyes narrowed. “One of yours?”

“Bernardo,” Tim confirmed.

“Guess we can let Nelson go for the night,” Raylan said.

“Not yet. Bernardo’s going to ward the property. May take a while,” Tim said.

“Magic user?” Raylan asked as Tim shifted the truck into park.

“Something like that. Family business, I think. He did the wards on the ranch,” Tim said. “Let’s get out there before Rachel shoots him.”

“I am not riding in the back with the dog,” Rachel had said when they were tossing their go-bags into the truck bed.

“S’fine. I’ll ride with Sheeba,” Raylan said, climbing into the back of the crew cab.

Bernardo had been pleasant enough for the few minutes he was there before he disappeared into the woods with a backpack over his shoulder to start warding the property. He was almost as tall as Raylan, and according to what Rachel said when they got on the road, as pretty.

“How come all the lookers are in the preternatural division?” Rachel asked.

“Isn’t that harassment?” Tim said.

“It’s not just me. Your wife—” Rachel started.

“Ex-wife,” Raylan corrected.

“Whatever,” Rachel said. “Winona felt the same way.”

“Isn’t that an invasion of privacy?” Tim asked.

Rachel shrugged. “Mmm. The invasion of privacy would be telling you Raylan agreed with Winona.”

“That’s uncalled for,” Raylan protested while Tim’s eyes searched him out in the rearview mirror.

“He doesn’t swing your way,” Tim said, his eyes on Raylan.

“You tried that already?” Raylan countered.
Tim snorted. “He’s a notorious womanizer. And you,” Tim turned to look at Rachel, “what’s got your panties in a bunch?”

“Speaking of harassment,” Rachel mumbled. “You—both of you—lied to me. Used me.”

“Uh…” Tim started, his eyes flicking over to Rachel then up to the mirror to Raylan.

“I told her what really happened the night Bo Crowder died,” Raylan said quietly.

“Shit.” Tim passed a semi pushing eighty-five.

“That’s all you got to say for yourself?” Rachel asked.

Tim rubbed the back of his neck. “No. You tellin’ Art?”

Rachel’s snort was of disgust. “I should, but no. You are.” She shifted in her seat and pointed to Raylan and then Tim. “Both of you.”

Neither replied. “You hear me?” Rachel demanded.

“We do,” Raylan said. “Just not tellin’ him yet.”

“Soon.” Rachel turned to look out the window.

***

Mags Bennett was not amused to find US marshals on her doorstep again.

“At least it’s a decent hour and not after midnight,” Mags said, pushing the screen door open and letting herself out onto the porch.

“Sorry Mags,” Raylan said. “You remember Deputy Gutterson, right?”

“Hard to forget that one,” she said, her eyes narrowing on Tim. “Little Loretta’s protector.”

“Mrs. Bennett,” Tim said by way of greeting.

Her eyes landed on Sheeba sitting to heel beside him. “What is that?”

“Trollhound,” Tim said. “Preternatural K-9 unit.”

“Guess I’m s’posed to be on my guard?”

Tim ignored her and Raylan let him.

“Mags, this is Deputy US Marshal Rachel Brooks,” Raylan said. “I’m afraid we have a situation… and Deputy Brooks needs to ask you some questions.”

“What kind of situation?” the older woman asked turning her attention to Rachel.

“A threat has been made on Deputy Givens’ life, Mrs. Bennett,” Rachel said.

“What’s that got to do with us?” Mags asked.

“That’s what we’d like to ask you,” Rachel said. “It’s my understanding that when the Marshals Service delivered news of the McCreadys deaths, you made a veiled threat against Raylan here.”
Mags laughed.

“‘That against the law now? Sharin’ a word of a caution with an old family friend? You know, neighborly advice.’

“What is it you’re cautious about, Mrs. Bennett?” Rachel asked.

Mags stared at Rachel. “Family business, Deputy. What is it you want to know?”

“When we get a credible threat on a law enforcement officer’s life, then we have to ensure we’ve followed all avenues of inquiry,” Rachel said.

When Mags didn’t reply, Rachel sighed. “Did you try to hire someone to kill Raylan or any other person, living, dead or preternatural?”

“Ahhh, I see now,” Mags said, waving her finger at Rachel. “No. I didn’t. And none of mine did neither.”

Rachel nodded.

“But you shoulda listened to my advice Raylan. Sounds like we ain’t the only ones unhappy with Boyd Crowder’s ways.”

***

“She wasn’t lying.” Rachel buckled the seatbelt in the passenger’s seat of Tim’s truck. “But she doesn’t like either of you.”

“No surprise there,” Raylan said.

“And what did you do to her?” Rachel asked Tim. “She really hates you.”

“Nothing,” Tim insisted.

“He promised protection to her favorite teenaged werewolf, Loretta,” Raylan said. “A marshal backing up the little girl puts Mags in a tough position if someone she’s fond of crosses swords with Loretta.”

“Why in the world would you do that?” Rachel asked.

“I was getting ready to kill her father. His last request,” Tim said simply. “It was the least I could do.”

***

They looked for Boyd first at his revival tent. The lot and tent were decorated for the holidays with purely secular lights and banners announcing special holiday services. All the religious symbols associated with Christmas, Hanukkah, or any other religion were anathema for vampires. There’d been mighty arguments, even some court cases, over the secularization of government and other public areas through most of the 90s after vampires came out of hiding.

Rachel tucked the marshal’s jacket around her more tightly. “Why are these people out here in the cold at Christmas to pray at a vampire church?”

“Got me,” Raylan said. “But if his flock is here, then Boyd won’t be far off.”
“Can’t you feel him?” Rachel asked. “I thought that went with the human servant-and-master-vampire bond.”

“We sealed it over,” Raylan said. “Like a magical bike-tire patch made of werewolf death magic.”

Rachel turned to him. “You’ve been holding out on me.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Raylan started off in the direction of an RV parked in the back of the lot. “Thought you already tore us one for that.”

“I did, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to tear you another.”

“Great,” Tim mumbled.

Tim banged on the door to Duffy’s RV.

A moment later Mike stuck his head out the door. “What’d you want?”

“Need a word with Boyd,” Raylan said.

Mike grumbled to himself and shut the door. A moment later, the door flung open in what Raylan viewed as the only invitation they were going to get.

Raylan shrugged and led the other two up the steps.

“Why Raylan, what’s brought you down to Harlan? Home for the holidays?” Boyd asked, grinning.

“Boyd,” Raylan said, his tone drawing short on patience. “Duffy,” he said, nodding to the other vampire in the living quarters of the motor home. “Need to have a word with you. Official marshal business. You remember Deputy Brooks, right?”

Boyd nodded. “I don’t have long Raylan. My flock is gathering as we speak for the late night service.”

“We saw that coming in,” Rachel said. “Big turnout for a cold Friday night in Kentucky.”

“The holidays are a time for reflection—whether you’re dead or undead, Deputy,” Boyd said, nodding.

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “Uh, well, Mr. Crowder, we’re here because we learned from a confidential informant that a contract has been ordered on your life. And Raylan’s.”

“Really now.”

“You don’t seem surprised,” Rachel said. “Is there some reason you think someone would want both you and Raylan dead?”

Boyd stared at Raylan in silence.

“She knows how Bo died, Boyd, and why I didn’t,” Raylan said. “If you know who’s behind the hit on either of us, we need to know. Who out there wants to kill us both?”

“Well Marshal, my flock has grown in the last few months and vampires are always curryin’ for power,” Boyd said. “It makes me a target. As my human servant, Raylan here could be seen as a stand-in. If you take out one or the other of us, odds of the other livin’ are slim. But we have been discreet about the arrangement.”
“‘Arrangement’ my ass,” Raylan interrupted.

“Do you mean to tell us there’s nobody you particularly pissed off lately, Boyd?” Tim asked.

“Other than you?” Boyd shot back at Tim.

“Yeah,” Tim said. “But you know I’m not about to take you out. Yet.”

Duffy cleared his throat. “If I may?”

“What Wynn?” Boyd said, sounding tired.

“I can think of one organization who’s not overly fond of either you or the marshal here,” Duffy said.

“Go on,” Rachel said.

“Well, if I understand it correctly, Boyd’s father was part of the network working closely with Miami. And didn’t Marshal Givens here take down a key member of their syndicate only a few months ago? Bucks, wasn’t it?” Duffy said.

“That explains them gunning for Raylan, but why Boyd?” Tim asked.

“Master Boyd has declined all offers to become part of their network,” Duffy said.

“That true Boyd?” Raylan asked, shocked.

“Why do you ask that like you believe it’s not,” Boyd replied.

After a moment of silence, with no one challenging the point, Boyd admitted it. “My mission is one of saving souls, not walkin’ in my daddy’s footsteps.”

Rachel turned, her eyebrows raised to exchange a look with Raylan and then Tim.

“Be that as it may, Mr. Crowder,” she said. “We also need to ask if you desire protection from the US Marshals Service.”

“What would protection from the Marshals Service entail?” Duffy asked.

“We’d assign either a deputy US marshal or a deputy marshal from the preternatural division, depending on our staffing availability,” Rachel said.

“You mean you’d send a human with a gun to protect me?” Boyd asked, then laughed.

Duffy and Mike joined in while Rachel, Raylan, and Tim waited silently, unamused. Raylan wasn’t surprised at their reaction.

“Does that mean you’re declining the offer of protection?” Rachel asked. She pulled out a letter from her jacket.

“It does,” Boyd said, shaking his head.

“All right, I will need you to sign here that you formally declined protection from the Marshals Service,” Rachel said, handing him the form and a pen.
The others had cleared the RV when Tim paused on the bottom step to turn and lean back into the motor home. Raylan turned to watch.

“I’d say you’ve got maybe twenty-four to forty-eight hours and then you need to be ready for what’s coming,” Tim said.

“Worried for your partner?” Boyd asked.

Raylan couldn’t hear his reply, but when Tim turned to step out of the RV, his eyes were cold and blank.

“What am I preparing for?” Boyd asked Tim’s back.

Tim turned back, his hand on the RV’s door.

“You know how all the bad little vampires call Raylan the Executioner?” Tim said. “Prepare for someone just as knowledgeable and twice as qualified.”

***

The three walked back to the truck speaking of the weather and the holiday lights, knowing that sensitive ears would be listening in on their chit-chat.

“I wouldn’t say twice as qualified,” Raylan murmured when they reached the truck.

“Of course you wouldn’t.” Tim smirked.

When Tim had the tent’s lights in his rearview mirror, he shot a look over at Rachel. “So, what did you get from that?”

“Boyd’s telling the truth.”

“Is that so?” Raylan said, leaning forward between the two front seats. Sheeba was curled up asleep on three-quarters of the backseat.

“Yes. About his intent not to work with Miami,” she said. “And I’d say he’s a true believer in whatever it is he thinks he’s selling to his parishioners.”

“Didn’t expect that,” Tim said.

“Neither did I,” she said. “And I’ve been putting in a lot of research into his church.”

“Huh,” Raylan said. “You think the hit’s out of Miami?”

Rachel pressed her lips together. “I’m not all that sure. Boyd might have been telling us the truth, but Duffy was lying about something.”

“About anything in particular?” Tim asked.

“About everything. I picked up waves of deception off him.”

“It’s barely nine now. Only three hours back to Lexington. You two want to head home or stay
“over?” Tim asked.

“Lexington,” Rachel said.

“Home,” Raylan agreed.

***

About a week after Tim got the offer for Thomas to take out Boyd and Raylan, they’d still seen no action.

Tim shadowed Raylan everywhere, both wearing bulletproof vests whenever they left the house. Bernardo and Harley switched off duties between watching the house and Winona. When she got to the courthouse, one of the marshals from the Lexington office took over shadowing her at work.

Harley turned out to be a not popular choice of backup. Well, not nearly as popular as Bernardo. Raylan watched through a window as Harley stalked off into the fading light. His lean slouching figure disappeared around the side of the house. It was his shift and he never seemed happy about rounds. Raylan couldn’t figure why. Between Bernardo’s wards on the house and property and Sheeba running the perimeter, monitoring the property wasn’t the hard part of the job.

“Why’d you bring him of all people?” Raylan said, turning toward the couch where Tim was stretched out with his Kindle. He didn’t have to say who he was asking about. Raylan knew Tim knew what he meant.

“It’s the holidays. He was available,” Tim mumbled. “And he owes me. Same reasons as the last three times you asked.”

And, Raylan thought, it probably wouldn’t be the last. He just didn’t like the guy.

He ambled over to the couch, feeling aimless. It a late Saturday afternoon—the last Saturday of the year, the last day of the year.

Raylan wanted to kiss Tim’s scowl from his lips, but Winona was sitting in the overstuffed chair adjacent to the couch watching a movie on TV. So he picked up Tim’s feet and sat down, holding them in this lap. He worked his thumb into the arch of his lover’s right foot, massaging sounds out of Tim, who moaned like sex itself. In fact, those were the very sounds Tim made when he was close to coming.

Winona looked up from the TV at the sound and clocked Tim’s feet in Raylan’s lap. “Seriously? I’m the one who’s pregnant.”

Raylan almost felt guilty. The almost must have shown on his face.

“With your kid,” she added.

Tim shrugged. “If you want me to complain, it’s not gonna happen. Feels good.”

“I can only imagine,” she said, then she pressed her lips together and shook her head at them.

“Here,” Bernardo said, pulled a footrest closer to Winona’s chair and sat down. “Give them here.” He waved his hands in a come on over gesture.

Raylan was surprised to see him, but then he always seemed to be. Bernardo had this way of appearing out of the woodwork—much like he remembered Tim doing when they first started
working together. Raylan figured this was associated with whatever the hell they did before they were marshals. Spook shit.

Bernardo had one of Winona’s feet in hands. Raylan wasn’t sure how he felt about it. He didn’t particularly care that the other marshal was moving in on his ex-wife. He’d been concerned that Winona didn’t realize that Bernardo was a player so he’d made Tim tell her one morning. The news had earned them both an eye roll before she informed them she was well aware. Bernardo was apparently upfront about being a player.

“You going with me to raise this zombie tonight?” Raylan asked, patting Tim’s leg. With the holidays and the heightened security, he’d had to scale back most of his zombie jobs. Besides making it difficult to put money away to help with the baby, it made his power cold and itchy as it built up in intensity in a way it hadn’t since he’d spent that week with Marianne.

“’Course. But does it really have to be tonight? Can’t they wait ’til this blows over? Besides, who wants to raise a zombie on New Year’s Eve?” Tim asked.

“People want weird animations around the holidays. Sometimes it’s nostalgia,” Raylan said. “And I need to burn off some power. Don’t want the seals to crack.” Raylan sent Tim a pointed look.

Tim nodded. “Nostalgia. That’s creepy as hell,” Tim said. “You leave me in the ground. You drag my ass up from the dead for Christmases and birthdays, I’ll take you back to the grave with me.”

Winona gasped at Tim.

“She’s joking,” Raylan told her, trying to head off what would eventually come next if he didn’t. She’d accepted over the last week that they’d been in danger due to his job. But she’d never been a fan of the job or the animation work. Winona didn’t realize he was a necromancer rather than an animator or bound to vampire. It was something he and Tim had unilaterally agreed to not bring up.

“We’re taking Sheeba tonight though,” Tim said. “We’ll leave Harley and Bernardo with Winona. This one is local, right?”

“Richmond, so pretty close.”

Tim liked the look of the cemetery in Richmond. For the most part, it was wide-open and surrounded by houses rather than heavily wooded areas. There was some tree cover here and there but not too thick in any one place. An older man with a shock of white hair and a prominent stoop met them at the limestone entrance to unlock the wrought-iron gates. It relieved some of Tim’s worry that the animation could have been a setup.

“Sign says no dogs allowed,” the man said, pointing to the sign at the front of the cemetery, then to Sheeba in the back seat of his truck.

Tim pulled out her K-9 papers from the truck dash. “She’s a deputy US marshal. As are we,” Tim said, handing the paperwork over for his inspection. “She’ll be running a perimeter on the property.”

“Just make sure you pick up after her,” he said. “Dog that big’d leave a mess.”

Tim scrunched up his face at that, took his papers back and pulled through the gates.

The clients were an older couple who hoped Raylan would raise their long dead son. The entire scenario disturbed Tim, making him more restless than he already was with Raylan out in the open in the dark—vest or not. Sheeba was running the perimeter and a Kroger plastic bag full of poop was hanging off the steel ball of the hitch at the back of his truck. Raylan was wrapping up the animation
from the looks of it. He had the salt out and was binding the zombie to the grave when Tim heard the shot and a whine carry his way.

His gut twisted because he knew somewhere out in the darkness Sheeba was hit.

“Raylan down!” Tim yelled, looking over to make sure his partner was actually down, which he wasn’t. He was pulling the clients down to cower behind a headstone. “Raylan, down dammit. Now. Call for backup.”

Tim clocked the direction the shot had come from—north. Good, he thought, Raylan and the couple were taking cover on the far side of the headstones. He opened the crew cab doors and yanked up the seat to pull his rifle and night scope from the built-in gun case.

Using the truck’s door for cover, he leveled his rifle, then he turned on the thermal imagery on his night scope to survey the area.

“Shit.” He found Sheeba first. She lay prone west of where he thought the shot had come from, making his breath catch. All he knew was she was down, and he couldn’t tell where she was hit or how bad. “Hang on girl. We’ll be there soon,” he whispered, knowing he was lying. He didn’t know when they’d be able to get to her.

Tim systematically scanned the area for the shooter through his scope. It wasn’t until he heard sirens in the distance that he saw movement and the bright thermal imprint of a figure moving toward the east. He flipped the thermal imagery to black-and-white night vision and saw the rifle in the runner’s hands. He aimed true and took the shooter down.

About that time, a Richmond city police cruiser sped onto the scene with sirens blaring. It skidded to a stop beside his truck. Tim held up his badge so the local cop would see that before he clocked his sniper rifle and decided Tim was the shooter.

“US Marshals Service,” Tim called out.

The police officer got out of the passenger side with his gun drawn. “We got a 10-53 call reporting gunshots.”

“My partner is taking cover over by those headstones with two civilians. I have a K-9 down to the north. GSW.”

“Well damn. Do we call an ambulance for the dog?” the officer asked.

“Call one for the shooter. And better call the coroner. You got at least one dead to the east.”

“Who? How?”

“Shooter. I took him out with my rifle. No idea if there’s a second. Betting there’s not since we’re still standing here.”

“How do you know he’s dead?”

“Oh, I know,” Tim said. “It was a clean head shot.”

“What the hell kind of marshal are you?”

“Preternatural,” Tim said. “Listen, I need you to take care of the civilians so I can get my K-9 medical assistance.”
“You need to stay at the scene.”

Tim dug his wallet from his pocket and pulled out a business card. “Here’s my card. Call the district office. Chief’s name is Art Mullen.”

Tim jumped into his truck and drove around the far side of Raylan, positioning the truck between his partner and where he’d shot the gunman, driving and parking over the dead. Thankfully Raylan had put the zombie back into the ground.

“Get in the back,” Tim ordered. “Sheeba’s down.”

Raylan jumped into the backseat. “Did you take out the shooter?” Raylan asked, leaning into the front.

“I don’t miss.”

They found Sheeba lying in the grass with a shoulder wound.

“Aw baby,” Tim said, stroking her face when she whined at him as he turned her so he could inspect her injury. Tim pulled his jacket off and pressed it to her left shoulder to staunch the bleeding.

“Can you lift her?” Raylan asked.

“Not easily but yeah,” Tim said. Together they managed to get her into the backseat with her head and shoulders behind the passenger seat. She took up the whole backseat, so Tim shoved the front seat all the way forward and crawled into the space between the back and front seats so he could apply pressure to her shoulder.

She whined again when he pressed down to the wound. “I know girl,” Tim whispered. “But we gotta stop the bleeding.”

“Where are we going?” Raylan asked.

“Clinic?”

“I got an idea. You trust me?”

“Course.”

Raylan did a three-point turn, hit the lights and sirens on Tim’s truck, and headed for the Interstate.

On I-75, he hit Send on his phone.

“Givens here. I’m coming your way. Any chance you’ll work on a Trollhound? Our K-9 has a GSW,” Raylan said.

Tim waited, listening to the sirens and Sheeba’s labored breathing. He worried that the bullet had bounced around before or after hitting her lung. Worse, he worried that it was silver. Hopefully, the hitter had normal ammunition since he’d been coming for Raylan.

“All right. We’re less than ten minutes out with sirens,” Raylan finished and hung up.

“Dr. Lillian is prepping for her,” Raylan said.

“We’re taking my girl to the coroner?” Tim’s voice cracked.
“We’re taking her to the only preternatural specialist we know in town,” Raylan said. “She asked about blood transfusions. You have any idea where we get our hands on Trollhound blood if we need it?”

Tim dug his phone out of his pocket and thumbed through the contacts to find Pete.

“Hey, it’s me,” Tim’s voice broke. “Sheeba got hit tonight. GSW. Doc is asking about blood transfusions if we need one.”

“Jesus Tim, is she okay?”

“No Pete, she’s been shot. What the hell am I supposed to do if she needs blood?” Tim took a deep breath.

“Relax. One of the reasons Sheeba was such great breeding stock to start with is her blood type is DEA one point one. It’s the dog version of the universal recipient and she passed it on down the line. How do you never remember this?” Peter asked, sounding exasperated.

“We never talked about her blood type,” Tim said.

“We did. You weren’t listening.”

“Whatever Pete.”

“What vet are you taking her to? That university clinic again?”

“No. We’re going to the coroner.”

“What the fuck, Tim. Is Raylan there? Hand me over to him.”

“No, he’s driving. Fast. With sirens. He doesn’t multitask behind the wheel at normal speeds. No way I’m handing him a phone now.”

“Put me on speaker,” Peter demanded.

“Pete’s on speaker Ray,” Tim said, holding the phone out in Raylan’s general direction with one hand, his other applying pressure to Sheeba’s injury.

“What’s up Peter?” Raylan asked.

“Why are you taking her to a coroner if she still viable for a blood transfusion?”

“Coroner moonlights—got a preternatural clinic on the down-low. It’s closer and probably better staffed on New Year’s Eve.”

“Ahhh,” he said. “Remember DEA one point one—that’s Sheeba’s blood type. It’s the universal recipient for canines.”

“I would have remembered that,” Tim mumbled.

“He might have,” Pete said. “But he’s emotional. He doesn’t do details well when he’s emotional. Call me when she’s settled.”

“Okay,” Raylan said, but Tim’s ex had already hung up.
“Tim, we need to clear Winona out of the house. Put her up somewhere either secure or obscure,” Raylan reminded him. He was surprised his partner hadn’t thought of that yet, but maybe Peter was right. Tim didn’t do emotionally distraught so that energy had to eek out somewhere. That somewhere seemed to be from his usual ability to focus.

“I’ll call Bernardo. Have him take her to her sister’s?” Tim asked.

“Gayle’s place. Winona’s not the primary target. I am… or Boyd is. Taking out her or the baby won’t impact someone trying to take down Boyd. Put her at Gayle’s with a bodyguard and she should be fine.”

Tim put the phone on speaker and made the call to Bernardo, explaining about the shooting.

“Aw, why’d he try to take out the pooch and not Raylan?” Bernardo asked. Raylan had learned over the last week that Bernardo had worked with Tim enough in the past to know Sheeba well.

“Don’t know. Good question though,” Tim replied.

“The shooter dead?” Bernardo said.

Tim snorted. “Yeah.”

“Anyone we know?”

“Didn’t look. Sheeba was down,” Tim said.

“We’ll find out from the coroner in the morning,” Bernardo said, then cleared his throat. “I’ll… um… get Winona packed up and stay with her in Louisville,”

“Tough assignment,” Raylan interjected.

Bernardo laughed. “You have no idea—well, maybe you do.”

Raylan switched off the siren and lights as he turned into Dr. Lillian’s long drive. He figured her neighbors were far enough in the distance not to notice, but showing up blaring sirens and flashing cherries down her driveway might risk calling more attention to her residence than she would prefer.

Dr. Lillian met them with a gurney in the drive. Tim and a nurse were lifting Sheeba onto it just as Tim’s phone started to ring.

“Just give me the phone,” Raylan said, his hand out to Tim. “You go on in with her.”

Tim handed the ringing phone to his partner without looking at it and took an end of the gurney heading for the infirmary.

Raylan swiped the call to answer.

“Hey Art—before you start in we had to leave the scene because Sheeba got shot,” Raylan said.

“Whoa. Sheeba all right?” Art asked.

“We’ll see. GSW,” Raylan said.
“Poor baby. I’m sorry. But we’ve got a problem. Boyd Crowder’s tent church just blew up.”

“Shit. Anyone hurt?”

“Some dead church members—human and vampire. Boyd lived, but we don’t know much more.”

“When?”

“About a twenty minutes ago,” Art said.

“That’s about when Sheeba was hit.”

“Was the bullet meant for you?”

“Who knows? I wasn’t anywhere near her.”

“Doesn’t sound right,” Art said. “Shooter dead, I take it.”

“You’re gonna hear from the Richmond police. I think Tim basically flashed his shield and fled the scene with a body on the ground,” Raylan said. “We both did.”

“I’ll make some calls. But tonight, I need you out of the field. And I need Tim to bring Crowder into protective custody,” Art said.

“Not sure that’s happening tonight, Art,” Raylan said. “He can’t go down to Harlan alone. Not tonight.”

“Afraid it’s going to have to happen. I can’t send you down there to collect Crowder or investigate this bombing with a target on your back,” Art reasoned. “You two are my only preternatural marshals in the state.”

“Actually, we’re not,” Raylan said.

“I don’t follow,” Art said.

“Spotted Horse. Let me call you back.” Raylan hung up and used Tim’s phone to call Bernardo.

Raylan just caught him before he left for Louisville with Winona. They decided switching out Winona’s protection and sending her to Gayle’s with Harley was the best option. Raylan pulled down the tailgate on Tim’s truck to sit down and breathe in the cold December air a moment, then he called Art back. He had just made arrangements for Rachel to pick up Bernardo and head down to meet Boyd so they could bring him into protective custody when Tim walked out of the infirmary.

“Hold on Art. Tim’s back.” Raylan said. “Any news on Sheeba?”

“They put her under and are doing X-rays…” Tim eyed the phone before hefting himself onto the tailgate to sit next to his partner. Raylan nudged Tim’s thigh with his own and ran a hand down his back before resting his elbow on the top of the truck-bed cover so he could drape his arm around Tim’s shoulders. “Her bulky muscle mass slowed down the bullet but they think it’s in her lung. And silver.”

“Shit. They smelled it?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are you two? The university?” Art asked. Raylan hadn’t put the phone on speaker but the
chief was picking up everything without it since Tim was so close. Art must have put fresh batteries in his hearing aids.


“Didn’t know we had one of those in Lexington,” Art asked.

“I believe that is the point,” Raylan replied.

“Fair enough.”

Raylan put the phone on speaker and brought Tim up to speed on the hit on Boyd and their plan to send Bernardo to Harlan.

“I’ll go with Rachel and Bernardo,” Tim said.

“You sure about that?” Art said.

“Ray can stay here with Sheeba. Someone just tried to kill him and Boyd. He can’t go to Harlan. Besides, she’s out. Wouldn’t know if I was here or not. Plus, this place is off the grid,” Tim pointed out. “You don’t even know where we are.”

“True,” Art replied.

“I’m hardly helpless,” Raylan said, rolling his eyes.

Tim half-smiled with pursed lips and nudged Raylan at his complaint.

“I’ll meet Rachel and Bernardo and follow them down to Harlan,” Tim said. “Rachel and I can bring Boyd and Duffy back and leave Bernardo on the scene for the investigation. With human and vampire deaths, they’ll want a preternatural deputy to play a part.”

“You sure you’re all right?” Raylan asked after they hung up telling Art that Tim would meet Rachel and Bernardo at the Love’s Travel Stop off Boonesborough Road in roughly thirty minutes.

Tim nodded and hopped down from the truck. “Guess I got to go.”

“In a sec,” Raylan said, coming to his feet. He crowded into Tim’s space. “You sure you’re all right?”

Tim narrowed his eyes at Raylan. “Pete’s wrong. I handle emotions just fine.”

Raylan swallowed the impulse to smile at Tim and leaned in to kiss him instead. Just once, lingering a little longer than he should have. “Stay safe.”

Tim tipped his head and lifted his chin in a nod of all the agreement Raylan figured he would get on the matter, then he turned to shut the tailgate. Raylan watched his lover’s eyes grow cold and distant. He figured Tim was focusing on the night ahead. But then he heard Tim cuss.

“Fuck.” Raylan turned to see his partner staring at the back of the truck.

“What?”

“You’re gonna get calls from that old man who runs the cemetery.”

Raylan snorted. “I expect so. We left a dead man who wasn’t supposed to be there on his grounds.”
“That too. But an hour ago, there was a big bag of dog shit hanging off my hitch.”

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to all of you out there for reading and sticking with this fic. We're in the homestretch for book two, yay! I'm unreasonably unexcited about that for some reason.

Thank you for the comments and kudos. I appreciate them more than you know, which I've said before, but it will always stand true.

Feel free to stalk me on Tumblr and say hi, too.
http://cher-locked.tumblr.com/
And my headcanon blog: http://mouth-of-this-holler.tumblr.com/
I still tag for shit and have no plans to change that any time soon.
xxox
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I would like to thank Jonjo for beta-reading ten-fold. This wouldn't be nearly half as much fun as it is without her help and input.

So, canon typical violence in this chapter. Both canons.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Raylan fell asleep on Dr. Lillian’s couch watching TV in her family room and awakened only when the coroner shook his shoulder. Pulling his stretched-out legs up, he dug his fingers into the muscles on the right side of his neck working at a crook of tight muscles. She handed him a cup of coffee.

“Your partner called. They’re on their way to pick you up.”

Raylan’s took in the coroner in her silky robe and slippers. She looked like someone’s grandmother. Not his. But someone’s.

“Thanks,” he mumbled. “Time is it?”

“Almost five in the morning,” she said, sitting beside him and smoothing the folds in the robe flat.

“Sheeba?” Raylan asked.

“Checked on her before I woke you. Fine. Sleeping. Once we got the silver out she started to heal,” Dr. Lillian said. “Quickly. She’s more than meets the eye. Does the Marshals Service realize she’s closer to preternatural than mundane?”

“Probably not. All they care is that she can do the job and listens to Tim,” Raylan said. “When did Tim say they were getting here?”

“Not long. I’m going to go change and you can go ahead down to the infirmary to wait.”

Raylan had earned the roam of the downstairs of Dr. Lillian’s house after Sheeba got out of surgery. Dr. Lillian had pulled a silver bullet from her lung. Fortunately, her tough hide and thickly muscled torso had slowed down the bullet so it lacked the momentum to bounce around inside her chest cavity. The hound was built for more than just speed or comfort.

After hitting the bathroom, he topped off his coffee and headed down to the infirmary.

Raylan was waiting outside when Tim and Rachel pulled up.

“You seen Sheeba?” Tim asked in lieu of hello.

“Last night. She’s sleeping. Healing quickly, I’m told.” Raylan was sure he wasn’t telling Tim anything that Dr. Lillian wouldn’t have already explained when he called in to let her know he was on the way.
Still, Raylan was surprised to see Tim’s tight stance deflate a bit so he moved forward to pull him into a hug, wrapping his arms around his shoulders. Tim pressed his cheek to Raylan’s and slipped his arms around his torso sliding his forearms up Raylan’s back.

He buried his nose in Tim’s neck and picked up remnants of his lover’s emotional terrain on his skin: worry, sadness, anger.

“Come on,” Raylan whispered in his ear. “You can go see her for yourself.”

Raylan kept his fingers entwined with Tim’s and led him down the stone steps into the infirmary. He heard Rachel following them.

When Dr. Lillian showed Tim into the room where Sheeba still slept, Raylan grabbed Rachel’s forearm and held her back in the hallway.

“We can wait.”

She shook her head. “But I want to see…”

“You can pick up more than enough from here, I’m sure. Give him his moment,” Raylan said, nailing her with a look. “Where’d you guys put Boyd?”

“He and Wynn Duffy are in safe house with a big basement and two caskets,” she said.

“So Duffy came in with him?”

She shook her head. “That guy’s a weasel.”

Raylan nodded. “What’s the situation down there?”

“We left Bernardo to run the preternatural end of the investigation. Bomb under the pulpit. Boyd wasn’t on stage when it went off but walking down among the congregation. Nine dead—a mix of human and vampire. A few injuries. The tent burned to the ground,” Rachel reported.

“Any leads?”

“Boyd assures us he has information but will only meet with us tomorrow when his lawyer is present,” Rachel said.

“Bad idea,” Raylan countered. “His lawyer not only represents vampires from Detroit, she sired him.”

“She also repped Duffy and he’s smack in middle of Boyd’s operation,” Rachel reminded him. “If Duffy is going to be there, what’s the difference between him and a woman who is at least bound by client privilege.”

“Client privilege is a human law,” Raylan said. “These are vampires.”

“That might be so, but Boyd wants to deal for protection in exchange for information he has.”

“Our protection?” Raylan asked, incredulously. “What happened to us just being ‘humans with guns’?”

Rachel held her hands up. “No idea. But Vasquez wants the meeting not long after dark tonight.”

“Art’s never going to go for that.”
“No,” Art said, crossing arms and turning down Boyd Crowder’s request for protection from the US Marshals Service. “Last time we made a deal with you, you died before you could testify.”

“You got my daddy anyway,” Boyd countered.

“I’m not putting my people on the line for you when you failed to deliver on anything but your own agenda,” Art said.

Raylan, Tim, Rachel and Art met with Boyd and Wynn in the conference room in the marshals’ office. Raylan put his foot down about Vespucci attending, concerned she had connections to Detroit, and surprisingly, Boyd concurred.

David Vasquez was leading the meeting pushing for the marshals to trade their protection of Boyd for information that would lead to his Holy Grail: building a preternatural RICO case landing him a cartel or two of undead fish.

Raylan shook his head at the thought, knowing that Vasquez was chasing the impossible. There was a reason the established system didn’t prosecute vampires or lycanthropes for anything that amounted to more than fine. Unless they were willing to stick around voluntarily, they’d learned early on there was no way to hold them. Eventually, the stronger vampires rolled guards and simply walked out. Lycanthropes weren’t any easier to contain in any way that could be considered humane. Humans had yet to find a method for confining the preternatural, which was why he and Tim’s jobs as executioners existed.

“Now wait,” Vasquez said. “Let’s hear what Mr. Crowder has to offer.”

Art glared at Boyd and pointed at him. “Fool me once, shame on me, fool me twice and I’ll just let Gutterson shoot you.”

Tim smiled out of the corner of his mouth, and Boyd’s eyes traveled over to Raylan’s. His shields and the munin seals had blocked Boyd from his senses for some time now. But he didn’t need the connection between a human servant and master vampire from the two marks he now carried—or even the mental telepathy Raylan’d once had forced on him by Bo Crowder—to know Boyd was thinking Tim wasn’t going to shoot him. Yet.

“Sounds fair,” Boyd said to Art. “Three groups have contacted my organization wanting me to take up where my daddy left off.”

“What does that mean?” Art asked.

“Harlan was a hub in the vampire black market network when Bo ran Harlan,” Boyd said. “A couple groups want me to step into Bo’s shoes.”

“Doing?” Art asked.

“Preternatural trafficking, drugs, other immoral business,” Boyd said.

“More immoral than running a porn shop in a trailer in back of your church?” Tim asked.

Boyd shook his head. “That’s the wolves business.”

“Uh-huh,” Tim said.
“Who contacted you?” Vasquez demanded.

“Well, now, first things first.”

“Meaning?” Vasquez said.

“I want my church back.”

Vasquez’s right eyebrow hiked up closer to his hairline. “We can guess who without you Mr. Crowder.”

“And you’d be guessing. My church?”

“Fine, you can have your church back,” Vasquez bit off. “Who are the players and what can you give me that will help us put them away?”

“You mean down, don’t you?” Raylan interjected.

Vasquez glanced at Raylan surprised.

“These are vampires we’re talking about. Powerful ones. If you’re taking them down, that means we’re putting them down. Ain’t no way to contain them,” Raylan said. “They’re not going to sit in a cell and wait for you to bring them to trial.”

“Doesn’t mean we can’t try to build the case,” Vasquez said, digging his heels in. “Who are we talking about here?”

“One more thing. Protection,” Boyd said. “You offered it a while back. I’d be obliged if I could take you up on that now.”

Tim sighed. “Boyd, who are we protecting you from?”

“Do I have it?”

Art sighed. “See, the problem here is if you were a human witness, we’d put you into WITSEC and be done with it,” Art said. “By asking for protection and wanting your church back tells me you have no plans of going anywhere. And even if you were willing to relocate, where in the country could we put you? I can put some people on you for now. Get to the bottom of the order on your death. But the US Marshals Service stays out of vampire politics for a reason.”

“Boyd, there’s a difference between marshals protecting life and sticking our noses into vampire politics,” Raylan said. “Just what are you hoping to get out of all this?”

“I just want to run my church.”

Art’s eyes circled the figures at the conference table landing on Rachel who nodded minutely.

“All right. We’ll assign protection to you. For now. Not indefinitely,” Art said.

“Three territories came knocking who want back into Harlan. Miami, the Dixie Mafia and Detroit.”

Tim cussed. “You’re going to turn on south Florida, the Dixie Mafia and Detroit? And you want the marshals service to throw their people on the pyre to protect you? What do you think three vampire cartels will do to single vampire preacher who turns on them? Not to mention…” Tim turned mid sentence and waved in Raylan’s direction.
“Not to mention what?” Art asked.

Raylan knew what Tim didn’t want to mention: Boyd signing off on his own death sentence meant he was signing off Raylan’s as well.

“I think Tim means that you’ve been stealing their power bases with your church,” Raylan said. “You moved through the Bible Belt and that’s squarely in the middle of the Dixie Mafia’s territory and part of Florida’s. Tim’s right. They’re probably already willing to put you down. Turning them over to the Marshals Service won’t help matters much for you in the vampire community all told.”

Art tapped his finger on his chin. “I get Dixie and Florida. But why Detroit? Harlan’s hardly the only stop south… it’s not even on the Interstate and Detroit’s far removed from the Bible Belt. You open a church we don’t know about in Michigan? What’s Detroit got against you?”

“Well,” Boyd drew out the word in a guilty tone.

“Well what?” Raylan demanded.

“I might have promised them control of Bo’s territory in exchange for…” Boyd spread his hands out plaintively.

“For?” Tim pressed, gesturing with a wave of his hand for Boyd to go on.

“For their assistance in turning me and displacing Bo.”

“Jesus Boyd,” Raylan said. “They didn’t displace Bo. I did.”

“And that was my point,” Boyd reasoned. “They didn’t deliver on what they promised. You did.”

Raylan pointed over to Duffy. “This guy, he was one of their people, wasn’t he? What’s his play here?”

Duffy held his hands out. “I was a free agent. And now, I work for Master Boyd.”

Raylan shook his head, mumbling, “Master Boyd my ass.” He pointed at Boyd. “I know you brought him in for the money to raise your tent-church, but surely you can see he’s just in this for the power? And who knows what else?”

“No need to be insulting, Marshal,” Duffy said. “I brought along some of my own following.”

Raylan rubbed his chin, then smoothed out his scruff.

“Mr. Crowder, what can you give me, aside from your word, that these three cartels are running a black market through this part of the country? Any evidence? Any records or documents from your father’s operation?”

Raylan had heard that nothing RICO related had come of Bo’s storage shed but a mountain of porn videos associated with the Harlan wolf pack. Rachel had Chris from IT running through to check for illegal content. If the guy wasn’t such an asshole most of the time, Raylan would have felt bad for him.

Boyd started to answer, then paused before continuing. “I admit I do not have anything such as that, but I can give you my word as one of God’s creatures, I am telling you the truth.”

Vasquez sighed and they all fell silent.
“May I interject?” Duffy asked.

Vasquez shrugged. “Sure.”

“Might I suggest a parley?” Duffy said.

“A what?” Rachel asked.

“A neutral meeting,” Raylan answered.

“Master Boyd’s intent is to run his church, legally. The vampire cartels want to drag him into a black market network. As a result, now we’ve had innocent blood spilled. If we had a parley and the marshals mediated, perhaps we could work out Master Boyd’s issues so he can go about his business,” Duffy offered.

“Why would the cartels want to show up to a meeting mediated by the US Marshals Service?” Tim asked.

“Because if they don’t come to us,” Art said, “we’re going to go to them. Isn’t that right, Mr. Duffy? With the blood of innocents on the ground and an accusation of their involvement, we’d have to look into all their operations. See who was behind the bombing and threatening Mr. Crowder here.”

Duffy nodded.

Vasquez perked up. “Is this a meeting we can record?”

“Doubt it,” Tim said.

“The vampires who show up will be powerful masters,” Raylan explained. “They’ll be able to see or hear the wire if you try to send anyone in hot. Not to mention, they’ll probably won’t show up without lycan bodyguards whose hearing and sight are as sensitive.”

“Are you shitting me?” Vasquez shook his head in clear disbelief.

“Tim, can you stand up for a bit?” Raylan asked.

Tim stood, looking to Raylan. “Just stand here?”

“Yeah. Now Vasquez, what weapons do you see on Tim?”

“Sidearm.”

“Anything else?” Raylan inquired.

“Cell phone and wallet in his front pockets?” Vasquez guessed.

“Not weapons,” Tim said.

“That it?” Raylan asked.

Vasquez narrowed his eyes on Tim, looking closer before he shrugged. “That’s it.”

“Boyd, what weapons do you see on my partner?”

Boyd smiled, flashing a bit of fang, then leaned back in his chair to get a better look at Tim. “Obviously the gun,” Boyd started. “A knife down on his left leg. Sticking out of his boot maybe?”
Backup gun strapped to the right calf. I’d guess a knife under the phone. There’s a strap around his thigh there.”

Tim reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver throwing blade.

“And you have a garrote in your hat band, Raylan, but then we already knew that, didn’t we?” Boyd finished.

“He miss anything Tim?” Raylan asked.

Tim just smiled in reply.

“Well, you get my point? Boyd’s a new master and he caught most of what Tim’s carrying. The others have been around the block a while. They’d know if we had the room wired.”

“The electronics have a buzz,” Duffy said.

“Then how do vampires use computers and cell phones?” Vasquez asked.

“Many don’t.” Duffy shrugged.

Art finally reminded Vasquez that three federal marshals should be witness enough to get him the warrants he would need to dig further if something actually came from this meeting other than getting the cartels off Boyd’s case.

“Three?” Raylan asked.

“Yeah, you’re taking Rachel,” Art said, raising his eyebrows at Raylan.

“Oh sure.” Raylan should have realized Art would want her there playing the emotional barometer.

They decided they would set up the parley for later in the week, to allow time for the other vampires to travel to the area since they could only travel at night. Duffy would work with Art to issue invitations to meet in Harlan that the masters would realize shouldn’t be turned down.

While Duffy was talking to Art, Raylan pulled Boyd aside.

“So, why Duffy?”

“You said it. He brought along funding after you took my church,” Boyd said.

“But why him as your second?” Raylan pushed. He didn’t like that Rachel kept telling him that Duffy was deceitful, but he didn’t want Boyd to know that Rachel had her own special brand of insight. “The guy’s entirely self-involved. People won’t follow him, but they do follow you. How does a guy like that help you build a church? I can see how you appeal to him—you’re gaining power and he’ll level-up the more you accumulate. What’s in it for you, Boyd?”

“Why Raylan? You sound jealous.”

Raylan squinted at Boyd and flattened his lips into a frown.

“Fine. He brought along a number of blood-oathed vampires from the area, Raylan,” Boyd replied.

“I don’t trust him.”

Boyd nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.”
When Tim left to take Boyd and Duffy back to their safe house, Rachel sat down on the side of Raylan’s desk.

“How does he keep from losing his phone?” Rachel asked Raylan.

Raylan tried to follow what she was asking him and then remembered Tim’s weapons. “Oh, the slit in the pocket is smaller and higher up his thigh than the phone. Big phone.” Raylan held his hands so far apart and smiled mischievously.

“Oh yeah?” Rachel replied.

“Oh yeah.” Raylan leaned back in his chair.

“Nice.” She nodded, then more solemnly said, “You need to tell Art.”

“I need to tell Art how big Tim’s... phone is?” Raylan said.

Rachel smacked his shoulder. “Don’t be an asshole. You need to tell him you’re Boyd’s human servant.”

He straightened up in his chair, turning his attention to his monitor. “I know.” Raylan clicked open his e-mail hoping she’d get the message and wander off.

“No, I mean now. You need to tell him before this parley. If shit goes sideways—”

“And it will,” Raylan interrupted. “Vasquez’s preternatural RICO case is bullshit. It'll never happen. And we maybe... might... have a slight, teeny little chance of talking some vampire masters into laying off the new undead preacher, but that’s only if we can get Boyd to stop blood-oathing vampires away from them. And turning humans from their territories.”

“All right. *When* the shit goes sideways then, you can’t blindside Art. He deserves to know.”

“Fine.”

An hour later, Art stopped by Raylan’s desk on the way back from the break room with a cup of coffee in his hand.

“You believe him?” Art asked, sipping from his mug then wincing.

“Boyd?” Raylan asked.

Art nodded.

“He wasn’t lying,” Rachel added, from her desk.

“Yeah, but he talks more shit than a two-dollar radio,” Raylan said. “You know we’re never going to bring in a vampire RICO case for Vasquez, right?”

“I was getting that idea,” Art said.

Tim strolled back in.

“Got the vampires all settled?” Art asked.

“Safe and sound.” Tim headed to his desk.
“I think I’m going to head out for the night then,” Art said, frowning at the coffee in his mug.

“Actually,” Rachel started and finished by shooting Raylan a hard look.

“I got it, Rach,” Raylan said. “Art, I need a word.”

“What’s going on?” Tim asked, as he watched his partner follow Art into his office and shut the door.

“You too, Tim,” Rachel said.

Tim looked from Rachel to Art’s closed door. “Aww, not now.”

“Yes now.”

“What’s up, Raylan?” Art said just as Tim opened the door and slipped in. “Tim, Raylan and I—”

Tim sighed. “I’m in on this too.” Tim took the other chair in the room.

Art sank down into his chair, sighing. “Is this anything like the last one-on-one we had?” Art asked, his eyes sharp on Tim.

Tim winced. “Little bit.”

“I told you I’d fire you if you pulled anything like that on me again,” Art said to Tim before he turned to Raylan. “Now, I know you’re not a former spook too. So what’s up?”

“Before we do this parley for Boyd, there’s something you need to know about the night Bo Crowder died,” Raylan said.

“You killed Bo and Tim did CPR on you,” Art said.

“Both those are true. But the CPR didn’t work. I would have died if Boyd hadn’t marked me.”

Tim was quiet, but he slid his foot out so his boot bumped up against Raylan’s.

“Marked you how?”

“Vampire marks. He made me his human servant.”

“Whoa whoa whoa, you work for Boyd Crowder?” Art stood up and slapped his hands on his desk.

“No, no, no, no, no. I have free will. I do not work for Boyd Crowder. But the fact is, there’s a metaphysical bond between us. Same as the one that Bo put on me—only Boyd stopped at the two marks. Just enough to get my heart beating again,” Raylan said. “It seems that my necromancy is attractive to vampires.”

“And you knew about this?” Art turned to Tim, pointing at him.

“I did.”

Art shook his head. “I’m beginning to see why you piss Vasquez off so much Gutterson.”

Tim held up his hands. “How am I in trouble here?”

“For not telling me. Can either of you two assholes tell me why the hell shouldn’t I kick both your asses out of Kentucky tonight?”
“Now Art—” Raylan said.

“Don’t you start. Can we even run this parley with you compromised?” Art said.

“I think we have to,” Raylan answered. “And I’m not compromised.”

Art shook his head.

“You get anywhere with a name of who offered the original contract for Crowder and Raylan yet?” Art asked Tim.

“Still working on it. The holidays threw a wrench in it. My guy thinks he’ll get a name this week from the transfer.”

“I guess this explains why the contract was out for the two of you. Who else knew that you are Crowder’s human servant?” Art asked.

“We ran that down,” Tim said. “Raylan and myself. My business partner and Nahtoo—”

“Peter knows?” Raylan interrupted.

“He and Nahtoo are together now.”

“No shit.”

“Gossip later, ladies,” Art snapped. “Who else?”

“Raylan’s kin and guru Marianne. Mags Bennett.”

“Was that really why you went down to talk to her?” Art asked.

“Partly. She did make a veiled threat that Raylan needed to separate himself from Boyd,” Tim said.

“Obviously Boyd knows. His… what is she? Girlfriend now?” Tim asked.

“Ava Crowder and Wynn Duffy know,” Raylan finished.

“All those people…and none of them your chief,” Art pointed out.

“Sorry Art. Just couldn’t risk it. If you tossed us out of Kentucky, then I didn’t know how we’d ever find a way out of it,” Raylan said.

“Well, we do have one way out.” Tim said.

“No. We already decided that wasn’t an option—”

“What are you talking about?” Art demanded.

“Tim offered to become a vampire and…” Raylan trailed off.

“Kill Boyd Crowder and take over where he left off? Maybe you could run his church and become a vampire gangster while you’re at it? All so you can be this asshole’s vampire master?” Art asked.

“Of course it sounds like a shit idea when you put it like that,” Tim said.

“What’s involved in being Crowder’s human servant?” Art said
“At first, there was a connection. He’d slip into my dreams, but I built up my mental shields.”

“I remember you, Rachel, and the dragon girl doing that,” Art said thoughtfully. “Did Rachel know?”

“No. No, she didn’t.” Raylan shifted in his chair.

“She knows now though, doesn’t she?”

Raylan lowered his eyebrows at Art. “How did you—”

“Made you come in here and tell me, didn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“So you and Crowder share dreams. You fuckin’ him too?” Art said.

“That’s uncalled for,” Tim interjected.

Art and Tim stared each other down for a moment until Tim looked away. “That’s not on the table, Chief.”

“We don’t share dreams since I built up my shields,” Raylan went on after the digression. “I performed a ritual with a lupa—that’s the mate of a wolf pack leader—who’s my cousin. Sealed over the marks with wolf death magic. For now, anyway. I can’t even sense when Boyd is near. Nothing except some power spillover. It’s partly why I started taking on more animation work. Burns off the excess energy.”

Art shook his head. “Are you two this much of a pain in the ass when you’re assigned to other districts?”

Tim tilted his head as if he was considering the question. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“Before the parley, we thought—”


Raylan nodded. “Fair point. Rachel said you needed to know before we went in, in case things went sideways.”

Art covered his eyes with his hand and rubbed his forehead. “All right. You told me. Now get the hell out of here.”

“What are you gonna do?” Raylan asked.

“Don’t know yet. I need to do a little research first,” Art said. “The preternatural branch plays fast and loose with the rules. Some of those guys act like chasing monsters is the equivalent of marshalling in the god damned wild west. And you two fit right in. Until I know more, we have a parley in two days. But don’t be too surprised if you don’t both end up on suspension the first of next week.”

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A day and a half later, Art hadn’t said any different so Raylan and Tim joined the convoy down to
They pulled into the lot around Bo’s old tourist-trap vampire mine.

Raylan got out of the truck and looked around. “Why does it always have to be a mine?”

“I thought you grew up around coal. Dug coal with Boyd Crowder and all that?” Rachel asked.

Raylan shuddered.

“Because the Marshals Service owns and runs this until auction,” Rachel said. “We had the management close it tonight. We rent space to a few vampires who still work here and sleep in a few domestic caverns. Bo was onto something. These places make good money. When Clive has this ready for auction, it’s going to turn a tidy profit for the victims’ fund.”

Raylan and Rachel went up to the glass door and she pressed her badge flat to it.

A young vampire came to the door. He was a redhead who hadn’t been dead long. He opened the door and Tim came up behind the them.

“We need you to open the heavy equipment door,” she said.

“All right, just a sec,” the redhead said, then disappeared back into the mine.

“When does this start tomorrow?” Tim asked.

“Afternoon. A lot earlier than we expected,” she said.

“Yeah, only powerful vampires wake before nightfall. What time is the meet?” Raylan asked.

“About three.”

“Shit they aren’t fooling around,” Tim said.

Just before three the next day, Raylan was waiting with Tim and Rachel in the room the mining tour used for slideshows and safety information before touring the mines.

The room was dug into the side of the mountain—the coal treated so that it was textured but glossy. Recessed lighting gave the room the feel of an amphitheatre. Distressed wooden benches that usually sat in the middle of the room were pushed off to the side, with four left in the room’s center in a loose circle. The vampires would arrive in their vehicles, driving into the outer chamber of the ground level of the mine, then Nelson and Bernardo would shut the outside doors that blocked off the light so the vampires could unload.

Boyd and Duffy, freshly awakened and fed, were sitting together on one of the benches facing the door at the back of the room while Rachel stood near them with her back to a screen Raylan assumed the mine management used for their presentations to tourists. Raylan took up to her far left and Tim to her right. They’d decided as mediators, they’d space themselves out a bit. Boyd and Duffy had spent the night in the chamber where the vampire miners slept during the day so they’d be able to be up and around by the time the meeting started.

Frankly, Raylan was a little surprised Duffy had pulled it off, making the meet time. He expected it of Boyd with all the power he’d been soaking up in the last couple months.

The first vampire master to arrive was from the Dixie Mafia. They’d been traveling from Biloxi, Mississippi, Rachel had said. Raylan had no clue where the vampire master had spent the previous
day sleeping. It had to have been somewhere local.

A lycanthrope entered first, through a pair of frosted glass double doors.

Raylan was surprised to see a huge powerfully built woman guarding the master vampire. He could tell by the way she moved that she wasn’t human, but he couldn’t place the scent. It was a type of lycan he’d hadn’t encountered since he’d become bound to a vampire.

Raylan sniffed the air again.

“Hyena,” Duffy whispered.

The lycan at the door zeroed in on Duffy. “What was that?”

“Oh, Marshal Givens was curious about your heritage,” Duffy explained.

“You could have just asked. I prefer Juanda to hyena, thank you,” she huffed, then focused on holding the door.

“Master Fabian representing the Dixie Mafia,” Juanda said.

Fabian was next through the door.

Raylan gauged him as about thirty years old when he died and from what he could sense, the vampire had been dead just shy of fifty years.

“Master Fabian,” Raylan said. “We appreciate you making the trip.” He went on to introduce himself, Tim, and Rachel.

“You’re the one they call the Executioner.”

Raylan nodded. “I am.”

“And that one’s called Death.” Fabian pointed at Tim.

“He is.”

“I’ve never heard of that one.” He nodded to Rachel.

“She’s a local marshal here in the Eastern District of Kentucky. We’re waiting on two other parties if you’d like to have a seat.”

Fabian gave the room a once over and took a seat with his muscle, closest to the door on Tim’s side of the room.

The Miami Cartel arrived next.

Raylan knew Gio Reyes on sight from his years working in Florida.

Gio strolled into the room first, a young male werewolf trailed after him and then took a position beside him.

“Deputy Givens.”

“Gio. So you’re high enough in the food chain now to speak for all of the Miami Cartel?” Raylan asked.
“Since Tommy Bucks died, yes,” Gio said. “I’m here for the Southern Florida territory.”

Raylan paced the room. The vampires sat in silence waiting. A good ten minutes had passed since Gio and his bodyguard arrived, and no one from Detroit had even darkened the door.

He stopped beside Tim and lifted his arm to look at the time on the watch face resting on his inner wrist. Tim side-eyed Raylan but said nothing.

“Twenty past. I’m not sure Detroit’s going to show,” Raylan said.

“Maybe they didn’t have the fortitude to make the meeting time,” Fabian said snidely.

Raylan shrugged, pacing back to his side of the room.

“I wanted to save introductions until everyone was here but—”

“I assure you,” Gio interrupted, “we all know each other.”

Raylan gave him an assessing look. “Still, Deputy Brooks here would probably like to put names with faces, right?” He turned and shot her a questioning look.

“Of course,” Rachel said.

“I’ll make it fast.”

“Boyd Crowder and his second Wynn Duffy. Boyd’s the territory master vampire for Harlan County and runs a church. Master Fabian is here with his bodyguard Juanda from the Dixie Mafia.”

“Fabian, you’ve been running the Dixie Mafia for thirty years now?” Rachel asked.

“Close to that.”

Raylan nodded. “All right. Next, Gio Reyes, city master of Miami and the greater south Florida area. Heavily involved with the Miami Cartel which covers the better part of the Sunshine State. Your bodyguard?”

“Ernesto.”

“We asked you to this parley because we understand you’ve both approached Boyd about going into business together. Yes?”

Gio and Fabian stared at Raylan.

“The thing of it is, Boyd here has stated he doesn’t want to pick up where his father left off. That right Boyd?”

“My calling is to save souls through my church.”

Gio scoffed and Fabian shook his head.

“All right,” Raylan said. “You might not agree with his ideology but we need to come to an understanding.”

“Why are we here if Crowder doesn’t want to do business with us?” Fabian asked.

“There’s an underlying issue here. Boyd’s territory is gonna keep spreading through the Bible Belt
and that spills over into both your areas of influence and probably more of the country,” Rachel said. “As long as he is following the law, as marshals we have the same responsibility to him as any US citizen, to protect his safety and rights if he’s threatened. We’re here to see what kind of solution we can come up with so Boyd can run his church peaceably around both your territories.”

“You brought us all the way down here to talk about this little upstart’s church?” Gio demanded.

“Thing is, we had bystanders—both humans and vampires—killed last week because someone was trying to kill Boyd and one of our marshals,” Tim said. “Through a confidential informant we’ve learned a contract was taken out on Boyd and Raylan here.”

Gio laughed. “Shame. But no business of ours.”

“I agree,” Fabian added.

“See,” Tim said, waving at Gio, “this is why we wanted to speak with both of you. Since you’ve both tried to pressure Boyd into working with you in, what was it? A black market network?”

Tim was met with silence.

“Well?” Raylan pushed. He knew neither master would speak of any illegal activity, but he had to try or Vasquez would go ballistic.

“Did you snitch Crowder?” Fabian asked, low and angry.

Raylan clocked Fabian and Juanda. The Dixie Mafia had a noted longstanding creed—thou shalt not snitch to the cops. “Now wait just a minute there Fabian…” Boyd said, speaking for the first time.

Suddenly, the vampires and their bodyguards stilled, turning toward the door, and then Raylan finally heard what they had: a vehicle pulling up outside.

“That must be Detroit—”

Raylan wasn’t sure who he was expecting to see come through the door but it wasn’t Winona with the snub of a gun barrel pressed into her baby bump.

Harley was on the other end of the hand holding that gun. He pushed her into the room, standing close behind, using her as shield and currency. They’d find out soon what her presence was supposed to guarantee.

A vampire and a lycanthrope followed Harley into the room. Given how it was still early, the vampire had to be master level.

“What the hell Harley?” Tim demanded.

Harley was still shielding himself with Winona, but he peeked around Winona’s head leaning in Raylan’s direction just enough to answer Tim, not realizing that both Raylan and Tim had pulled their weapons. They’d been guaranteed the mine was sufficiently ventilated to handle weapon fire without causing an explosion from built-up gas. Raylan figured they’d be testing the filtration system’s effectiveness soon enough.

“What can I say Gutterson? Gio’s people pay bet—”

Raylan wasn’t sure which of them shot first until he saw the blood spatter. Harley’s skull and brain matter flew in two directions—first to the left toward Raylan’s side of the room and then to the right
on Tim’s. The sound of the gunshots reverberated like a pinball against the closed coal walls, leaving the humans with ringing ears and lycans growling.

“The hell Raylan?” Tim said

“I owed him one.” Raylan shrugged.

Ernesto yanked Harley’s dead body and tossed it aside—his strength sending the body flying off toward Tim, then he grabbed Winona. Raylan realized how powerful the young wolf was when he pulled a partial shift. One of his arms wrapped around her neck in a headlock and his bared claws rested over her abdomen in a clear and obvious threat.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, gentlemen,” Gio said. “I’m going to need all the marshals to put their weapons on the floor and kick them toward the outside of the room.”

Tim’s aim shifted to Gio.

“Or what?” Tim said.

“Or Marshal Givens will find that his child’s entry into this world could be most cruel.” Gio nodded his head at Winona.

Raylan lowered his weapon, then bent at his knees and placed his Glock on the floor. He toed it with his boot toward the outside of the room. He heard Rachel move behind him and looked over at Tim. His partner’s eyes slid from Gio to Raylan, who shrugged.

Tim then lowered his weapon and followed suit.

“The one at your ankle, too,” Gio said.

Tim bent down and pulled his backup out of the calf holster and slid it along the floor toward the wall.

Fabian cleared his throat. “Gio, this doesn’t concern us. If you don’t mind, Juanda and I will be on our way.”

“Perhaps in a few minutes, Fabian,” Gio said. “Wouldn’t you like to come to an understanding with Crowder here before you give up?”

Fabian nodded his head in what Raylan guessed was concession.

“Gio, bringing my family into this is hardly in the spirit of the word parley, now is it?” Raylan offered. “You don’t need Winona to talk to me or come to an agreement with Boyd here.”

“When you took down Bucks, that ended any conversation we’d have here before we even started. You were a blight on the Florida territory. And now I finally have the opportunity to do something about the Executioner.”

Raylan looked Gio straight in the eye. “Gio, I’m telling you now. Last chance. Send Winona back out the door, and we can resolve what we came here for. Or we can do this another way.”

“How are you looking me in the eye, Executioner?” Gio accused. “You were always so careful about eye contact in the past.”

Raylan felt Gio’s power pressing in on him, aiming at the marks under the munin seals.
“Gio, you’re gonna have to cease trying me with vampire powers. You’re already over the line with Winona to the point that either Marshal Gutterson or I could legally put you down. Using your powers against me only makes your execution more justified.”

Gio laughed. “With what? The little knife in Death’s pocket over there? Did you think I didn’t see that?”

He went back to pressing Raylan with his power, testing him.

“Gio, this is not going to go well for you if you don’t stop,” Raylan cautioned.

“I believe we have a problem, Marshal,” Gio said.

“More than a few I’d say,” Tim mumbled.

“I call foul, Executioner,” Gio said. “You’re carrying two marks from a master vampire that has the distinct reek of Mr. Crowder here. I hardly call this neutral territory.”

“You have what?” Winona asked.

“Now now,” Raylan said, shaking his head at her.

“Don’t you know, dear? Your husband here—”

“Ex,” she said.

Gio sighed. “He is Boyd Crowder’s human servant—which means he’s eternally bound to a vampire…”

Winona’s face fell in a look of hurt and maybe a little betrayal. It wasn’t a look he’d seen since the end of their marriage.

“That is,” Gio continued. “He’s eternally bound to him unless another vampire, like myself, breaks those bonds.” Gio smiled showing his fangs. An older vampire, he didn’t flash them pell-mell like Boyd tended to.

“Now this definitely doesn’t have anything to do with us,” Fabian said. He and his bodyguard moved for the door when Gio nodded to the female vampire who’d come in with Winona.

“Pilar, please,” Gio said.

Her body flew at Fabian just as her werewolf companion partially shifted and attacked Fabian’s bodyguard.

Raylan didn’t get the opportunity to see how the fight progressed because he never even heard Boyd coming.

Suddenly Boyd was at his side taking Raylan’s wrist in his iron grip.

“I’m sorry Raylan,” Boyd said quietly, then he struck—biting down into his wrist long enough to draw couple swallows of blood from Raylan’s vein before licking the bite and dropping his arm.

It wasn’t the pain from a bite with no accompanying thrall to soften it that got to Raylan; when Boyd drew his blood, he’d put a third mark on Raylan causing the munin seals to crack and shatter, opening up all three marks between them.
Raylan reeled under the wave of power he felt pouring off Boyd. No wonder the surrounding master vampires were either ticked off or felt threatened. Boyd had more than leveled up in the months Raylan had been mentally, then magically blocking him.

“God dammit Boyd,” Raylan said, covering his wrist with the palm of his other hand, applying pressure and trying to soothe the pain of the bite.

“The fuck?” Tim muttered. Raylan wasn’t sure if he was responding to what Boyd had done or what was now going on where Fabian had stood.

Fabian ended up scrunched down on the floor half-leaning against the wall with a stake in his heart. Raylan could smell the blood spilling out from Juanda’s throat before he saw the pool spreading from her body. The wolf had tossed the werehyena in the direction of Harley’s body where she bled out.

Gio turned back to Raylan, taking in Boyd standing beside him and his wrist. He felt Gio’s power press at him once, then the vampire growled.

“That will cost you dearly,” he said. “Ernesto, I think one bite earns another.”

The werewolf tugged Winona’s head to the side and sank his teeth into her neck. She screamed and tried to pull away from him, cradling her stomach as if she were protecting it. Ernesto held her effortlessly and then spit into the bite drawing attention to the fact that he was making sure she’d be exposed to lycanthropy. The smile he turned on Raylan was all grimace.

“Fuck,” Tim gritted out. The wolf turned eyes to Tim and then spit again at the bite on Winona’s neck.

Winona’s cries turned to hiccups and tore at Raylan. He didn’t want to be with her, but he hated to see her hurt. He didn’t even try to give credence to the part of his brain that was processing his child might end up a wolf.

“Do you understand what just happened here Executioner?”

“You exposed Winona and my child to lycanthropy,” Raylan said. “Oh, I get it.”

Gio laughed. Too much.

“No Ray…” Tim said, his voice sad.

Raylan turned to Tim, whose expression told him more than Gio’s laughter.

“Oh, I’m going to enjoy this so much more for your lack of expertise. You—you and Boyd Crowder just killed your unborn child,” Gio said.

“But—” Raylan started.

“No Ray…” Tim tried again to caution him.

“Isn’t it apt that Death knows what’s happened to your child while you don’t,” Gio said, smiling. “Why don’t you explain it to him, Marshal?” Gio waved at Tim.

Winona shifted wide desperate eyes between Raylan and Tim. If he didn’t understand, he knew she didn’t either.

Raylan knew that Tim had more experience with hunting lycans and dealing with the entire culture. Raylan’s specialty was death magic and vampires. Tim grew up hunting rogue lycans.
“Tim?” Raylan pressed.

His partner sighed, his eyes sad. “Winona will change at the next full moon and when she does, she’ll lose the baby. Lycanthropes don’t carry to term unless they’re really strong before they get pregnant and have an established support system that can keep them from shifting for the term of the pregnancy. Only ones I’ve ever heard of doing it are born tigers.”

“No,” Winona cried out and her legs gave out from under her.

Ernesto’s arm dug into her throat and she pulled at it, trying to get her wobbly legs under her to work.

“Gio, I’m going to enjoy killing you,” Raylan promised. He’d done nothing to close the distance between being comfortable and the idea of having a child, but the threat of that baby’s death on Gio’s orders enraged him.

The master vampire scoffed. “No, Executioner. I don’t think so. Your wife will lose this baby either way. If you cooperate, she’ll live to shift at the next full moon and lose the baby. If you don’t, she dies here.”

Raylan met Gio’s eyes again.

“Aren’t you precocious—still looking a master vampire in the eye?” Gio asked.

Raylan felt Gio’s power rise and push at him again, but he could also feel Boyd at his side, his vampire power mingling with his necromancy, shoring it up—as if the forces were happily reunited.

He shook that thought from his mind and concentrated on Boyd.

*Boyd? You hear me?*

*Why Raylan, it’s been so long—*

*Cut the shit. I’m going to roll Gio. I need you to…*

*Roll him with you?*

*Yeah.*

*I thought you would never ask.*

And then they did.

Raylan started by pushing his necromancy mixed with Boyd’s power back at Gio.

The first thing Raylan felt was a rush of power from Boyd that he’d never experienced before—it felt direct, burning cold, and encompassing. Raylan thought it felt like icy cold water rushing through a pipe and somehow, he’d become the pipe and the water fed his necromancy and his own death magic surged.

What shocked him was that he felt them roll over Gio. His power—just as cold and gushing as Boyd’s—fell and gave way to them. Raylan felt Gio’s sudden malleability and he did what came naturally by mentally inhaling.
As Raylan rolled Gio with his necromancy, he first inhaled Gio’s power as he gave in, then Raylan inhaled Gio’s people and suddenly he and Boyd were awash with the power of a territory full of vampires. The faces flashing through his mind weren’t known to him… he saw the back of Winona’s head through Ernesto’s mind as the werewolf—Gio’s personal wolf to call, somehow Raylan knew that along with other things from Gio’s mind—gave in to him because of his connection with Gio’s power. He saw Tim’s mouth moving and Rachel’s look of concern. Funny, he hadn’t heard Tim talking.

Tim watched Gio sway.

“Raylan? Raylan!” he yelled. He wasn’t answering. It was like his lover was in a trance.

“What the hell’s happening?” Tim demanded.

Wynn Duffy smiled. “Raylan and Boyd are rolling Gio and all of his people along with him. It’s quite the rush, actually.”

He looked back Rachel who shrugged. “I’ve got no idea… but he’s determined.” She turned away from him and Tim saw her retrieve her weapon.

Tim turned toward Raylan and then saw that Gio and his people were faltering under whatever Raylan was doing to Gio. He watched Pilar fall back against a wall, seemingly stunned.

Then, he saw his chance. Ernesto collapsed, his arm falling away from Winona.

Tim moved fast—as fast as a human could, which wasn’t fast enough that day.

He ripped her from Ernesto’s grip and shoved her back into Rachel’s direction.

“Take her Rach,” Tim ordered, he slipped his hand into his pocket to pull his silver throwing knife. Then he realized the flaw in his calculation. Pilar had fully succumbed to the power drain since she was probably blood-oathed to Gio. The two wolves in the room clearly had a connection to Gio but they also were part of a pack.

Tim saw the claws coming and tried to dodge them, twisting his torso away as his raised arm sent the throwing knife flying at Ernesto.

Only he was too late, too slow, too human.

Raylan heard Winona screaming his lover’s name and it shocked him out of the downward spiral that came with soaking up the energy of the vampires in the greater south Florida territory. He’d gorged on power and wanted to fall down and push it out into the world. He’d known Boyd had soaked up as much as he had—more probably, but to Raylan, this meant his necromancy was surging like he’d never experienced.

He became aware of Winona crying behind him. “Tim, no,” she plead.

In a haze, his eyes sought Tim out where he’d been standing the last time Raylan had been aware of him.

“Where…” he started and then he saw Tim’s fallen body, the knife in Ernesto’s throat, and the evenly spaced slashes across Tim’s stomach.
“Noooo.” Raylan’s shout thundered against the shiny black coal walls. First his child and now his Tim. He gave into the engorged power surging through him and did what he’d always done with it.

He dropped to his knees, his palms flat to the floor and poured all the excess power buzzing through him into the ground, seeking out the dead. Time of day be damned. Power circle to protect the living and dead? Fuck it. He pushed his necromancy to search out and reach the dead and then he ordered them.

“Come to me,” he whispered, letting his head fall back.

He knew they were coming. He could feel them.

“Rachel, get Winona out of here. Just run and don’t look back. Call an air vac unit for Tim. Don’t think an ambulance is gonna cut it.”

“But what about the other vampires—” Gio and his remaining people were incapacitated but not dead.

“They’re not gonna be a problem for long.”

“Raylan, what does that mean?” Rachel asked, sounding scared.

“It means go on, get out. While they’re still down. And by God, get help for Tim.”

Raylan crawled over to where Tim had fallen on his side.

Claw marks raked the side of his waist and crossed his abdomen, through his vest, his clothing, his skin. Raylan recognized the shiny skin of something not nearly red enough pushing against the gashes.

Raylan tore off his marshal slicker that Tim had ironically made him wear. He wrapped it around Tim’s side, then he turned his partner onto his back so that he lay supine on the floor.

A pool of bright red blood—fresh and frightening—had collected under Tim where he had fallen.

Tim groaned. “Ray?”

“Shhh. Stay still. This is gonna hurt.” He pulled the jacket tight across Tim’s stomach to cover the slashes and hopefully contain the fallout, literally.

“No, don’t,” Tim gritted out, his teeth clenched.

“Have to. You are not dying here.”

“Don’t.” Tim tried to push at Raylan. “Don’t touch me. You’ll get it.”

Raylan was incredulous. Tim wasn’t afraid he’d contracted lycanthropy, but that he’d pass it on to Raylan. “Just shut up. This is going to hurt.”

“Wait. My gun. Get it and shoot them while they’re down.”

“Can’t leave you. And I had a different idea.”

Tim didn’t answer him.

“I’m sorry,” Raylan said, leaning down to apply pressure to stave off the blood loss and hopefully
keep Tim’s intestines from spilling out of him.

Tim tried to throw his head back but couldn’t. He arched his back instead. It must have hurt because he collapsed in a moan.

“I—” Raylan started to say when he realized Tim had passed out.

The blood seeped through and around the jacket. Raylan didn’t think anything soaked through those damned slickers. But Tim’s blood managed to and was soon covering his hands and forearms as he knelt beside his partner trying to apply pressure.

Raylan could feel them coming closer. Almost there.

“Raylan,” Boyd interrupted. “If you want me to I could…”

Whatever he was going to offer, Raylan didn’t care.

“You need to get out of here Boyd. Wynn too.”

Just then, the vampires that lived in the mine came walking through the double doors—eyes empty, eight of the most perfect zombies he’d ever created. They walked without shuffling. They hummed with his power—flush with all the energy that had surged through him when they’d rolled Gio.

They’d do nicely. Raylan smiled.

Boyd didn’t.

“Raylan, what have you done? These are my people. My flock…” Boyd walked through the group, aghast.

“Boyd, you and Wynn need to get the hell out of this room now if you want to live.”

Duffy was already backing his way out the door. Clearly, he didn’t need to be told twice.

Boyd paused, but then strode to the door.

Raylan wondered if Boyd peeked into his mind to see what he had planned. Whatever, he was gone.

Raylan felt each and every one of the vampire-zombies waiting for him to command them. He was so far off the grid of what his mama taught him and loathe to leave Tim, he decided to continue winging it.

He’d put down no protection circle, so these zombies weren’t invulnerable to evil spirits. He had no machete for his ritual. But blood, blood he had.

“Come close to me,” Raylan ordered and they circled him just as he pictured them doing in his mind.

He reached over Tim’s body and soaked his right hand in the pool of Tim’s blood. He lifted to his knees and flicked it into the faces of the vampires.

“By blood I bind you,” Raylan said, dumping more than half his usual ritual because Marianne was right. He didn’t need it. He raised them during the day because he decided it was possible. Necessary. He’d now command them how he wanted.

“Kill everyone in this room except the man underneath me,” he ordered, then added. “And myself.”
After all, zombies were literal creatures.

Raylan gently lowered himself over Tim, leaning over him, his weight on his forearms, his long torso still applying pressure to Tim’s wounds. The gashes were so long—Raylan didn’t think applying pressure with just his hands would cover enough of the wound. He hoped his upper body shielded Tim from any carnage flying in the room and applied more even pressure. He listened to the vampire-zombies tear into the flesh of Gio and his crew. They hadn’t been dead. They’d just been weakened. But Raylan didn’t care.

The imminent danger he need to prove the kills were justified was apparent. His methods were just... untraditional. Fortunately, the preternatural division specialized in untraditional methods. He only hoped he could convince Art of that. Because this was more than simply an op gone sideways. He pushed Art from his mind. Raylan wasn’t even sure he wanted to be a marshal if Tim couldn’t be.

Because Raylan had never heard of a lycanthrope marshal.

“Hearts and heads,” Raylan commanded. “Don’t stop until you’ve pulled out their hearts and torn off their heads.”

He felt Tim’s hand on his back rubbing, then patting.

“Hey, you’re back.”

Tim licked his lips, breathing shallowly.

“Well, this is an idea, anyway. Not sure if it’s better than shooting them,” Tim whispered, his voice thready. “Can’t believe you waited ’til I’m nearly dead to raise a zombie army.”

Raylan would have laughed if Tim’s words didn’t scare him so much. “Had to do something with the power. Hang on for me, all right? Rachel’s getting help.”

Tim nodded.

“Guess I’ll never be a vampire,” Tim said, he turned his head to the side as his eyes roamed what he could see of the room and the handiwork of Raylan’s vampire-zombies.

“Don’t worry about that now, but give me your hand so I can monitor your pulse,” Raylan said.

Tim lifted his left wrist into Raylan’s hands. He hadn’t wanted to shift around, but he wanted to know where Tim’s pulse stood.

One by one the zombies in the room stopped. Covered in blood and gore, they’d finished with their orders.

“Stop,” Raylan called.

“Wha…” Tim started. He’d passed out again. It hadn’t been long. Raylan had pulled off Tim’s watch so he could monitor his pulse. Only a few minutes had passed.

“Shhh, not you. Them. They’re…. done.”

“I command you to wait,” Raylan said, pushing his intent into the blank minds of the zombies around them.

Raylan heard sirens and dug his cell phone from his pocket and sent a call to Rachel.
“Raylan?” She answered in disbelief.

“Are the paramedics here?”

“Loading up to come in now.”

“It’s clear. Send them in.”

Raylan felt Boyd and Duffy near and growing closer by the second.

“Great,” he mumbled.

Boyd stood in the entrance of the door.

“My God Raylan, what have you done?” Boyd sounded bereft.

“I raised the dead, Boyd. It’s what I do.” He sounded tired even to himself.

“But my people.” Boyd walked around the vampire-zombies staring at them. He would stop and run his hand in front of the face of one now and then. “They’re like zombies.”

“They are zombies,” Raylan said. “And vampires. Vampire-zombies? Vampires are dead bodies after all, Boyd. And I animate dead bodies. You’ve known that since we were kids.”

Wynn Duffy gasped from the doorway. “This is why they killed necromancers in ancient times,” he said.

He moved out of the doorway and Raylan felt him retreat, using vampire speed to disappear into the depths of the mine.

“Oh Raylan. What of their souls?” Boyd asked softly.

“They’re not there. No one’s home. I never completed the ritual to put their… souls or consciousness back. They’re shells.”

“Shells. We’re all just... shells.”

Raylan felt a tingle of what he thought was Boyd’s anguish, but with the way he felt about the man lying underneath him... he wasn’t sure how to parse out the difference between spiritual and emotional grief.

Raylan heard more sirens and then Rachel and Bernardo burst into the room, weapons drawn.

“I told you it’s clear,” Raylan yelled. “How close are the paramedics?”

“On their way in,” Rachel said. “They checked Winona and she’s waiting on the ambulance. They’re flying Tim out. Be a few more minutes.”

“Did you tell them it was a lycanthrope attack?” Raylan asked.

“Yeah, the prep is what’s taking so long.”

“Great.”

The paramedics finished strapping Tim to a gurney.

“I’m goin’ with him,” Raylan said. His upper body was covered in blood.
“No, you’re not,” the younger of the two paramedics told him eyeing him. “No room. But Deputy, are you aware you have an open wound?” a young brunet paramedic asked him, already moving Tim toward the door.

Raylan raised his arm, seeing Boyd’s bite under all of Tim’s blood covering his forearm and hand.

“Have you been vaccinated for lycanthropy?”

“No,” Raylan said, wincing when he saw the looks of concern pass between them. Strangely, he felt a sense of relief that he could share his partner’s fate. There was little chance of Tim walking away from his injury without exposure to lycanthropy. If Tim had it, Raylan might as well.

“Come on out and ride with the female victim on the truck when it gets here. She’s stabilized and waiting,” the older paramedic said. “You need that checked out and purified, and maybe the lycanthropy vaccine.” He turned and jogged off after Tim and the other paramedic.

“Raylan.” Boyd grabbed his arm and held him back until the paramedics cleared the doors. “My people. You… you can not leave them like this. You just can not.”

Raylan had told the paramedics that the vacantly staring vampires standing around the room were just zombies. Since the zombies didn’t need medical attention, they’d taken him at his word. But Boyd, Duffy, Bernardo, and Rachel knew better.

“He’s right,” Rachel said. “I know you want to go after Tim, but you need to fix this.” She circled her finger in the air to indicate the entire room. “This has a problem written all over it.”

Raylan looked around the room at the stupefied vampire-zombies. Boyd was right. Come nightfall, what would happen to them? Even if he put them back, he wasn’t sure. He closed his eyes. They were people, after all, with rights. He figured their best chance of waking up dead come dark was if they weren’t already dancing on the strings of his necromancy.

“Tell the ambulance to go ahead without me,” he said to Rachel. She took off out the door, leaving Bernardo with Raylan.

Bernardo scanned the destruction left behind.

“Harley turned against you, huh?” Bernardo asked. His detachment reminded Raylan of Tim and he felt a renewed stab of worry.

“Seems so.”

He shook his head. “They had Michigan plates. We thought they were the Detroit contingent,” Bernardo explained. “Sorry man. If I’d had any idea Winona was inside that van… in here…”

“Wonder how they knew Detroit wasn’t going to show,” Raylan said.

“Good question,” Bernardo replied.

Raylan clapped him on the back, leaving a partially bloody handprint on the other marshal’s slicker. Oh well, it would wash. Or not.

Bernardo turned a dark look on Raylan, then eyed his shoulder, tugging his jacket to get at it.

“Yeah, got a little biohazard there…” Raylan shrugged, then turned for the door. “I’m gonna need
my animation kit from Tim’s truck.”

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank all of you who've kept up with this series. We cranked out the last two chapters today and I'm so excited to wrap this one and get started on the third installment.

Thank you all for reading, commenting, saying hey on Tumblr, and all the kudos. Y'all are one of my favorite things ever. :) xxox

C
Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Jonjo for beta-reading and for all of her input through this fic. This has been more fun than I ever anticipated and having someone to bounce ideas off made this so, so much more enjoyable. xxox

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Raylan placed his bloody thumb on the biometric fingerprint lock Tim had installed on the running boards of his truck. Along with a cache of automatic weapons, he also kept a spare key to his truck in the running boards. Find the spare, Raylan retrieved his animation kit from the floor of the crew cab.

Back inside the mine, Raylan found the vampire-zombies where he’d left them. Boyd was trying to talk to one of them to come to him, and it wasn’t working.

“Raylan, these vampires are blood-oathed to me,” Boyd said.

“Good. They should be. Don’t go getting any ideas like that Malcolm in St. Louis. The last thing we need is you creating a bunch of vampires you can’t control,” Raylan said.

“Funny you should bring that up Raylan,” Boyd said, a sliver of anger in his voice. “I can’t control these vampires. And they’re mine.”

“No Boyd, right now, they’re mine,” Raylan said, then turned to the zombies. “I order you to follow me.” He walked to the door and they fell in line behind him. “Come on Boyd, you too. Show me where these guys sleep during the day.”

“I’d hardly know that Raylan,” he said.

“Come anyway. I might need your help. You know, since you’re their master.” He pulled his cell phone out and called Rachel to ask her to come show them where the domestic caverns were.

They found a freight elevator and loaded everyone in and went down several levels.

Inside the coffin room, they found where Wynn Duffy had taken cover. His shock at seeing Raylan, Boyd, and the vampire-zombies was apparent.

“Do you know what you’re doing Raylan?” Boyd asked.

“Honestly, no,” Raylan said. “I order you to your coffins.”

The vampires walked to their coffins.

“How do you know they’ll rise again when you put them back?” Duffy asked. He still seemed rattled as the vampires moved around the room on Raylan’s orders.

“I don’t,” Raylan admitted. “But if I don’t lay them to rest, then they’re definitely not coming back.”
“You said you didn’t put their souls inside them,” Boyd ventured.

“That’s right. I didn’t need them present so I didn’t complete that ritual. I just needed…” Raylan trailed off.

“Didn’t need them at home in order to murder Gio for you?” Duffy asked.

“No, to execute him and his people. They’d taken the lives of Fabian and Juanda, sentenced my unborn child to death, turned my ex-wife, and hopefully they didn’t succeed in killing my partner.”

“You could have just shot them,” Boyd argued. “Or let Duffy and I finish them off. I was going to volunteer when you sent me out.”

“I was riding too much power, Boyd. It had to go somewhere.”

“Tell me one thing, Raylan,” Boyd said. “Before you put them back.”

Raylan pulled out his salt and his machete. “What’s that Boyd?”

“Where are their souls right now?” Boyd asked, his voice stark. He was standing in front of one of the vampires examining his face.

Raylan sighed. “I don’t know, Boyd. Now if that’s all your questions, I need to put them to rest and get to the hospital.”

“Do they still have them?” Boyd asked.

Raylan held the salt in his hands and tried to figure out if he should bind them to their graves or not. With a normal zombie he would, because he would want them to rest permanently in their graves. But his usual ritual using salt, blood, and steel to command them to walk no more went against the grain of the goal with these particular zombies. He wanted them up and walking in a few hours. He dropped the container of salt back into his kit. He’d winged it this far.

“Raylan?” Boyd asked, standing in front of him.


“Do they still have their souls?” Boyd demanded, his voice sharp and raised.

Raylan sighed. “Boyd, isn’t that your area more than mine?”

“Why do you think I’m asking?” Boyd said, his voice broken.

Raylan picked up his machete. “I’m sorry Boyd. I don’t know what to tell you. Now come tell me these vampire’s names so I can send them to sleep.”

Raylan approached the closest coffin, the redhead who let them in the night before. “Who’s this?”

“His name is Martin,” Boyd said.

Raylan turned over one arm and then the other looking for a good place to cut himself that wasn’t covered in Tim’s dried blood. Finally, he just rubbed a spot brushing away the brown flakes. He held his arm out with the machete over it to slice into underside of his forearm when Rachel spoke up.

“That’s not sanitary or safe,” she said. “I know you’re upset about Tim, but be smart Raylan.”
“Don’t have much choice.”

She walked over to him, pulled up the sleeve of her slicker and held out her arm. “Yes, you do.”

“I’ll have to cut you more than a few times.”

“I can take it. I’m a big girl,” she said.

He’d planned to smear his arm on the vampire’s mouth but they were covered in dried blood from Gio and his crew. Some of the crew had been lycanthropes, and Raylan couldn’t risk cross-contamination with Rachel. He just couldn’t do that to her.

“I couldn’t take it though, Rachel,” Raylan said and slid the blade across the spot of bare skin on his arm.

He pressed the cut to Martin’s lips, smearing his mouth with blood. “With blood I send you to rest, Martin. Wake with the coming nightfall,” Raylan said, pushing his necromancy into the vampire trying to believe that the amended ritual would work how he wanted it to.

Martin’s eyes closed and he sank back into his coffin.

“What are these vampires going to think when they wake up covered in…” Rachel waved at Martin’s general state.

“Boyd, you’re going to need to stay with them and talk to them when they rise. Tell them what you have to—but don’t tell them I animated them in their sleep. Order them to tell no one about waking up like this. They’re blood-oathed to you. They’ll have to obey,” Raylan said. “And Duffy too. Might as well tell him now.”

“But why?” Boyd asked.

“Because Duffy’s right. This—” Raylan pointed to the vampires in the room “—is why they used to kill necromancers. You think having the cartels come after the two of us is bad? If the greater vampire community knew about this, they’d be even worse. They’d come for you and me and never stop coming.”

“But Marshal, I didn’t mean—”

“Wynn Duffy, I order you to keep secret all the happenings from this parley. Take with you to your final death that Raylan animated vampires,” Boyd said.

“Yes, Master Boyd,” Duffy replied tonelessly as if he had little choice in uttering the words.

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With all the vampires at rest, Raylan headed to Tim’s truck.

“I’m going with you,” Rachel said. “They flew Tim to the heliport at Harlan ARH. Winona followed later in an ambulance.”

At Tim’s truck, Rachel asked for the key. Raylan stowed his animation kit in the backseat since Sheeba was still at Dr. Lillian’s. He saw his hat tucked in the back and thought about putting it on, but decided against it.

“No. No, no, no, no,” Raylan said. “He barely lets me drive.”
“Fine.”

Raylan hit the siren and the lights and headed in the direction of Harlan ARH.

“You scared Wynn Duffy,” she began. “Bad.”

“Yeah. Don’t think he’s all that comfortable with my necromancy,” Raylan said.

“He’s still transmitting deceit,” she said. “And when we brought up the contract, Gio and Fabian both felt surprised. Pleasantly surprised but surprised.”

“Yeah, I picked that up off Gio when I rolled him. He didn’t take out the contract, but he was still an asshole.”

“Not anymore,” Rachel said, critically. “Did you have to raise a zombie horde to execute them?”

“No. Didn’t raise them to execute Gio and his people. I would have ended up raising the horde one way or another,” Raylan said. “Too much power built up. We’re just lucky we weren’t next to a cemetery. Could have been putting zombies to rest all night.”


“It was roll or be rolled,” Raylan said. “Didn’t know I could until he tried to roll me after Boyd put the third mark on me.”

“Why have the zombies take him out? I’ve got silver bullets. So do you and Tim. You could have just shot him in the head and heart,” Rachel said.

“I could have, too. But I think he earned his fate. You don’t?”

“I didn’t say he didn’t. But Art’s not happy.”

“It’d be weird if he was,” Raylan said. “You called him already?”

“Mm-hmm,” she said.

“He gonna fire Tim?”

“Didn’t say. I thought that LEOs exposed and turned in the line of duty retired on disability,” Rachel said.

“Same thing, isn’t it?”

Rachel grew quiet and didn’t answer him. They were nearly to the hospital.

“Who did Art talk to from Detroit?” Raylan asked. “I’m curious about the no-show.”

“Let me look,” she said. Rachel swiped through her phone for a few minutes. “Guy named Quarles. You heard of him?”

“Nope,” Raylan said. “But I’d like to know how Pilar and Harley knew to put Michigan plates on their van.”

“You didn’t peek into Pilar’s mind when you were rolling her?”

“Don’t guess it works that way,” Raylan said. “Wasn’t it Wynn Duffy who put Art on the contacts
for the parley?”

Rachel nodded grimly.

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At the hospital, they learned Tim was still in surgery, but Winona had been admitted to a room. When they tried to go up to see her, the nurse sent Raylan back down to the Emergency Room to have his bite wound looked at.

They wanted to purify his bite. When they found out he was covered in the blood of a victim exposed to lycanthropy, they wanted to confiscate his boots along with the rest of his clothing. He turned them down on both the boots and the bite. Purifying Boyd’s bite wasn’t going to do anything to lessen the bond between master vampire and human servant, but he didn’t want to disclose that to them.

“I put down the vampire who did this,” Raylan said, knowing that would end the discussion. He gave up his vest and clothes, sending Rachel to the truck for his go-bag. They had a decontamination shower they wanted to subject him to before they would treat him. Raylan agreed figuring it was better than no shower at all, and it would increase his odds of not getting thrown out of either Winona’s room or the surgical waiting room.

Sitting on an ER bed wearing a hospital gown, Raylan waited through the examination.

“Where did you get all these little cuts?” the ER doctor asked.

“Oh, I did those,” Raylan said. “Putting zombies to rest.”

The doctor frowned at him and asked him again if he didn’t want his bite purified. He declined. Again.

However, he couldn’t stop them from drawing his blood to test for lycanthropy. If he was honest with himself, he wanted to know—he’d been hoping whatever it was would match Tim’s results.

Raylan and Rachel checked in with the nursing staff on the surgical floor. They were still putting Tim back together and had given him a blood transfusion early on.

“How’s he looking?” Raylan asked.

The nurse on duty pressed her lips together.

Raylan pulled his badge for her. “He’s my partner and my… partner,” Raylan offered. “How is he doing?”

He didn’t think that disclosure gained him much sympathy from her. This was Harlan, after all.

“We don’t have results of his lycanthropy test back yet. We have a backup at the lab. But when monitoring his hemoglobin levels during surgery, they saw increase beyond expectation after the transfusion,” she said. “They haven’t needed to do another.”

“What does that mean?” Raylan asked.

“He’s healing faster than a human normally would,” she said, then added. “I’m sorry.”

“But he’ll live?” Raylan asked.
“You do understand I’m trying to tell you he’s most likely contracted lycanthropy?” she asked.

“Yeah. I got that,” Raylan said. “But he’s alive and staying that way?”

“I… expect so, his prognosis is good,” she said, baffled.

“I’ll take it.”

They found a weepy Winona in her assigned room.

“They want me to have an abortion,” Winona said when he and Rachel walked into her room.

“I…” Raylan wasn’t sure how to respond to that. He’d begun to think of his unborn child as dead already. Or terminal. He pulled a chair closer to her bed and sank down into it. “Did the tests come back yet for lycanthropy?” he asked.

“Twice.”

“How do you mean twice? They haven’t gotten one result for Tim’s test and they ran yours twice?”

“They said they keep getting positive and negative results,” Winona said. “They can’t tell what’s false and what’s not.”

“Huh.” Raylan sat back in the chair.

“I wonder if that’s the lab backup the nurse mentioned,” Rachel said. “I’m going to go find some coffee.”

Raylan watched her leave the room. “Vaccine?” Raylan asked.

Sometimes doctors treated lycanthropy exposure victims with the vaccine. But the odds of it working were risky. Humans had been known to contract a strain of lycanthropy from the vaccine that was different from the one they were exposed to. Winona was bitten by a werewolf, but if she took the vaccine, she could contract tiger lycanthropy if that was the strain used in the particular vaccine she was given.

“They don’t vaccinate pregnant women for lycanthropy. Too high a risk.”

Raylan understood that. “There’s no way they can deliver prematurely?”

“She’s only nineteen weeks,” Winona said.

“She?” Raylan asked, stunned and a little bit more heartbroken.

“They did an ultrasound. Baby girl. She’s healthy,” Winona said. “Just… well, the full moon is next week.”

“Then she’d be twenty weeks old, right? Can’t they do a Cesarean or something then?” Raylan asked.

“She’d still be a few weeks too young to make it,” Winona said.

“Don’t make any decisions yet. I got an idea for a second opinion if you’re willing to go the unconventional route,” Raylan said.

“By unconventional you mean preternatural.” Winona stared him down.
“I do,” he admitted.

She nodded. “If it means there’s some way for her to live, then set it up.”

He pointed to the dressing at her neck. “How’s the bite?”

“Clean. I’ll have a scar whether I turn or not,” she said.

“Join the club,” he replied. Winona knew he carried vampire bite scars. Even Rachel had a war wound.

“That’s never been a club I wanted part of, Raylan,” Winona said.

Rachel had explained on the way up that Harley had taken Winona from her sister’s that day after Gayle had gone to work.

“Did you call Gayle yet? Let her know where you are?” Raylan asked.

“I did, but she won’t be coming,” she said. “She already wants me to abort.”

He sighed. “Sorry. Just promise me you won’t rush to any decisions.”

“Okay,” she said, reaching out to take his hand. He let her grab onto his fingers. “How’s Tim?”

Raylan squeezed her fingers. “Still in surgery. They think he’ll live, but that he’s positive.”

“He was very brave.”

“He’s always very brave.”

***

By the time they’d settled Tim in a room the next morning, they’d gotten a full run of lycanthropy tests back. More than a few times.

Raylan’s were like Winona’s. Negative and positive. They’d come to take his blood again, sure that there was cross-contamination going on in their lab only to come up with the same results. They wanted to release Winona, but send both her and Raylan to the University of Kentucky Hospital to see a hematopathologist. While a blood expert sounded like a fine idea to Raylan, he put in a call to Dr. Lillian too. She was expecting them to come for tests and collect Sheeba.

Tim’s test results were less controversial. He was positive. All around.

But he’d come through the surgery well. He’d only had a couple places where his small intestines had been perforated. However, he was healing like a lycanthrope rather than a human. They expected to release him by the weekend.

Raylan slouched in a chair next to Tim’s bed, his long legs stretched out in front of him where he’d fallen asleep waiting for Tim to wake up. His lover had been in a surgical ICU unit most of the night.

Raylan jerked awake with he felt a hand on right arm. “Ray.”

“You’re awake.” Raylan stood up and took Tim’s hand in his own, entwining their fingers together. He reached for the call button with his other hand.

“Don’t push that yet.” Tim’s voice was scratchy and his lips were dry. Raylan watched his lover’s
tongue slip out and try to wet them to no avail.

“They’ll probably bring you some ice chips,” Raylan countered.

“In a sec.” He tried licking his lips again, so Raylan leaned forward and kissed him, letting his tongue slide along Tim’s lips, licking them and trying to gain entrance to his mouth, but Tim wouldn’t open for him. He did kiss him back briefly close-mouthed, before he pushed Raylan away.

“My mouth tastes like roadkill.” Tim grimaced.

Raylan chuckled. “I can handle roadkill.”

Tim’s smile was small and thin-lipped. “Sure you can. What um…” Tim waved his hand up and down his body. “What’d they find out?”

Raylan watched the creases in Tim’s forehead and the dent between his eyes deepen. He ran a finger along the lines trying to smooth them out. Tim turned his head to escape him. “What are you doing?”

Raylan honestly didn’t know so he didn’t answer. “You have lycanthropy. Wolf strain. Your body already started accelerated healing during surgery… so it’s too late to try the vaccine.”

Tim’s eyes fell shut for a moment, then he opened them, his jaw a little tighter. “All right. The risk you take if you chase monsters long enough, right?”

“You had surgery to put you back together, but you’re healing fast.”

“Had to be an upside, I guess,” Tim mumbled.

“Can I call the nurse now?”

“Fine.”

***

Two days later, Raylan checked Tim out of hospital and drove to Dr. Lillian’s.

Rachel had taken Winona to her infirmary for a blood test the day before. Winona and Raylan had an appointment the next week at the U of K hospital for more testing. So far, she’d decided she wouldn’t abort since no one could tell her definitively if she had or didn’t have lycanthropy. Raylan was relieved.

“Sheeba still at the infirmary?” Tim asked.

“No, Peter and Nahtoo flew in late Thursday night and picked her up. They’re at the house with Winona.”

“And they didn’t come down?” Tim asked, sounding hurt.

“Is that what’s really bothering you?” Raylan asked, again driving Tim’s truck.

“No.”

“What then?” Raylan asked.
“Is Pete planning to take Sheeba back with him?”

Raylan reached over the console and grabbed Tim’s hand, holding it. “No. He’s not taking your dog. But the plan is to have Nahtoo shift when you come home and explain to Sheeba what the hell happened to you. Maybe smooth over Sheeba’s acceptance of your new condition a bit.”

“Oh,” Tim said. “That’s actually a good idea.”

“Uh-huh. Good thing you gave it to him then when we were in New Mexico.”

Tim grinned. “That’s right. Was my idea, wasn’t it,” he said, nodding.

Raylan snuck peeks at his partner and decided not to tell him how strongly Peter felt about retiring Sheeba from K-9 duty after her shooting. He also hadn’t been real happy to hear their good dog had suddenly taken to chewing up Winona’s fancy shoes. Nahtoo had been particularly appalled about that behavioral change.

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Raylan parked his truck at Dr. Lillian’s and they climbed out. Raylan’d told him he was supposed to get a blood test. They’d reached the bottom of the steps and opened the door when Tim sensed another wolf close.

“Wait a minute.” He grabbed hold of Raylan, pushing him behind him. Tim wasn’t sure how he knew. Maybe it was scent and sound. He wasn’t used to his heightened senses yet.

He inhaled. “There’s another wolf here.”

“Tim,” Raylan said, his voice carrying that tone he used when he was trying to force calm on him. “This is an infirmary for lycanthropes. There’s probably been more than a few werewolves around.”

Tim relaxed and Raylan pushed at him until they cleared the doorway.

Out of habit, he clocked the room the way he had when he was human—only this time his nose and ears added details he’d never picked up before. The infirmary smelled far better than any room at the hospital in Harlan had. He heard Dr. Lillian’s voice back in one of the offices.

“At least help them through the transition,” she said.

“I’ll consider it.” A male voice. Tim recognized it but couldn’t quite place it. “I’m not making him pack though.”

Ah, Jamil.

“Why not? He’d be a good wolf to have on your side. A US Deputy Marshal.”

“No way,” Jamil said. “He’d cut a swath of bodies straight through my pack right up to me. Maybe even me. You saw how alpha that guy was when he was human. Can you imagine him as a wolf?”

Tim frowned.

“What’s wrong?” Raylan asked him.

“Nothing. I think they’re expecting us,” Tim said. “And you are in the doghouse. I thought we were here for a blood test.”
Raylan’s face flashed with guilt, then cleared. “We are. Just have some werewolf stuff to knock out too.”

“Uh-huh.”

If Tim could hear them, they had been able to hear him too. Dr. Lillian and Jamil appeared out of her office, heading for the front of the infirmary a moment later.

“Raylan, Tim,” she said, warmly.

Tim was surprised. She’d always been so formal with them before, using his title rather his name. He guessed he’d crossed a threshold in her opinion.

“Thanks for seeing us,” Raylan said.

“Come on back and we’ll do your blood test while Tim and Jamil have a moment.”

Tim heard Raylan asking Dr. Lillian about Winona’s test results while she drew his blood. He tried to put that conversation out of his mind and concentrate on the werewolf in the office with him.

“I don’t want to be part of your pack,” Tim said. “Especially if you don’t want me.”

“You heard us talking.”

Tim didn’t reply.

“I will help you through the transition—you and your mate and his wife,” Jamil said.

“We don’t know if they’re positive or not,” Tim said.

“Still, I will have pack members senior enough guard and mentor them the night of the full moon in case they do shift.”

“I appreciate that,” Tim said. “Thank you.”

While he’d been in the hospital he easily picked up how hard the uncertainty had been on both Raylan and Winona. Raylan had accepted the idea that his child was the equivalent of terminally ill before the blood tests but the quirkiness of the results had the cruel effect of giving them all hope. Tim found his hope was tinged with guilt. He liked the idea of he and Raylan being cut from the same cloth… that he might turn with Tim.

“We will consider you a friend of the pack for now,” Jamil said. “And I will help you learn control.”

Tim was surprised by Jamil’s conciliatory attitude, but he appreciated the offer to help him learn control. He’d hunted enough rogue lycanthropes in his time to understand the necessity. His mind landed on the memory of Walt McCready’s bedroom and he tried not to shudder in front of Jamil at the idea of something like that happening to Raylan at his hands. Yes, he’d need to learn control and he’d need a pack—even a temporary one.

“Sounds more than fair.”

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The moon rose full that Thursday night.
Winona and Raylan remained human—or some close facsimile.

Tim did not.

Dr. Lillian expected no less of Tim, but had some theories about Raylan and Winona and wanted Winona to have an amniocentesis. She thought whatever made Raylan human-plus was probably carried on to his daughter, protecting Winona. Nahtoo thought Dr. Lillian was right because she said Sheeba knew that the baby Winona carried was the same as Raylan. When Winona didn’t turn, Raylan figured they could wait until the baby was born in late May or June to find out.

Raylan heard Tim’s transformation begin and wanted out of his cell to see him. Graham, Jamil’s pack member assigned to guard and mentor him if he did change that night, discouraged the idea—pressing that Tim lacked control as a new wolf to be around Raylan during the full moon.

“He’s my mate,” Raylan said. “I have a right to see him.”

“And what if he maims or kills you? Do you want him to turn back to find he’s slaughtered his mate?” Graham demanded.

Raylan seethed. He knew no one more disciplined than Tim. Control and Tim were synonymous.

Not long after the disagreement with his keeper, there was scratching and growling at the door.

Jamil said something and it stopped, then Raylan heard a whine and a knock.

“Open the door before he tears through it, Graham,” Jamil ordered. “It’s me.”

Graham opened the door and Raylan was stunned by the size of Tim’s wolf. He’d make Sheeba look small and somehow pale. His eyes were gray—far lighter than the Air Force blue of the human eyes Raylan was used to—but his fur was pitch black. Raylan wasn’t sure how he knew it was Tim but recognizing his mate felt the same as his necromancy seeking out and knowing the dead.

Tim slowly made his way into the room, putting himself between Graham and Raylan before approaching Raylan.

“Keep it short,” Jamil order. “He needs to eat. Preferably not you or he’ll kill me before himself in the morning.”

Raylan held out his hand and Tim moved his head under it, then crowded in closer to Raylan pressing against his legs and dropping his hindquarters to the floor.

Raylan squatted down so they were eye-to-eye and buried his fingers in the fur on the side of Tim’s neck. “You’re almost as pretty like this as you are as a man,” Raylan lied.

Tim huffed.

“Picked up on the fib, did you?” Raylan said.

Tim licked Raylan’s mouth. “Uh, no,” Raylan sputtered, standing up. “You wouldn’t let Sheeba get away with that, would you?”

The wolf looked away.

“Go eat and run. You can see for yourself I didn’t turn,” Raylan said. “Winona’s the same last time we checked. We’ll talk in the morning.”
The following Saturday afternoon, Tim pulled up outside Art’s house.

“Last chance?” Tim said.

“I’m sure.”

He watched Raylan climb out of his truck and open the back door to let Sheeba out. She’d accepted Tim’s new status more easily than he’d hoped for. He’d been afraid he’d have to send her off to live with Peter. But Nahtoo told him that she’d always considered him her alpha. The transition made some kind of sense to her that it didn’t to the humans around her.

Leslie answered the door.

“What are you boys doing here?” she said, opening the door. “Oh, you brought Sheeba. Come on in here honey. Art! Your deputies are here. He’s in the den. I’ll put some coffee on.” She turned for the kitchen patting the side of her leg and making kissing sounds.

Tim and Raylan headed for the den and Sheeba followed Leslie. Tim watched his dog wander away.

“What’s up with that?” Tim said.

“Oh, she’s like Sheeba’s grandma.”

“But I didn’t give her the command to release.”

“I’m not gonna argue with you about it again,” Raylan muttered. “Peter told you what needs to happen.”

“I don’t want to retire her from duty,” Tim said. She was more than old enough to retire and retiring meant she’d get to be just a dog. Tim hated the idea of not working with her.

“Think the conversation we’re about to have will take care of that whether you’re ready or not.”

Raylan took a spot on the couch while Tim sat near him on a chair. They’d handed Art their resignation letters. The Chief was reading them over.

“So you’re just quitting? Both of you?”

“Yep,” Tim said.

“No, I don’t accept them.” Art tore the letters in half lengthwise and handed them to Raylan. “Either one.”

“But Art—” Tim said.

“No. Make them come and fire you if they have the balls to kick the Executioner and Death out the door.”

Art’s words stunned Tim.

“You know, I did that research after our little pow-wow at the beginning of the month. There’s some marshal in the Midwest who’s the human servant of a vamp on the American Vampire Council.”

“Blake?” Tim asked.
“Yeah, her,” Art said. “They’ve never fired her.”

“She’s not the human servant to a criminal,” Raylan pointed out.

“Neither are you,” Art countered. “That we can prove. Yet.”

Tim watched Raylan process the thought. His lover tapped his lips with his forefinger and Tim figured he was running Art’s surprising stance through his head.

“And you,” Art continued, pointing to Tim. “If you were HIV positive, would you resign?”

“No.” He wouldn’t.

“Then what the hell are you thinking? Make them fire you, then sue them if they do. It’s a cultural policy, not a written one, that dictates a marshal can’t also be a lycanthrope.”

“But?” Raylan asked.

“But what?” Art demanded. “Had Vasquez research it for me. He couldn’t find a legal reason for the Marshals Service to fire you.”

“Why would he do that? Isn’t he still pissed about his potential RICO case going south?” Tim asked.

“Oh sure he is,” Art said. “But Raylan had every right to take out Gio. And Vasquez is too busy salivating over this other guy—Quarles to worry about dead vampires. Your intel that the contract came from Detroit was solid. While you two have been sleepin’ in, we got a warrant and Chris from IT backtracked fund transfers from that Detroit account and found the name of the hitter they hired after… um… Thomas. You’ll never guess who.”

Art was enjoying himself a little too much.

Tim decided he’d put Art out of his misery and bite. “Who?”

“Pilar.”

“Really?” Raylan said. “Guess that explains the plates and how she knew Detroit wasn’t going to show.”

“The account in Detroit that paid Thomas also paid Pilar,” Art said.

“Huh. Rachel and I both thought Gio was uninvolved in the contract,” Raylan said.

“Gio wasn’t surprised when she came in with Winona and Harley. My bet is she played her boss against the middle,” Tim said. “And since he had an axe to grind with you over Bucks, he let himself be played smack into the middle.”

“Between the contract and Detroit’s absence at the parley, that’s the next pond our AUSA wants to fish in. If you two quit or get fired, then what’s he going to use for bait?”

“Jesus Art,” Raylan said. “We’re not bait.”

“You kind of are. But the way I see it? Tim, you being what you are now will just make you a better preternatural marshal. Do I think you’ll get shit for it? Probably. Do I think we should pull you from the P-SOG rotation from now on? Absolutely. I don’t know what assholes are going to decide not to have your back if we send you to another state.”
Tim nodded. That issue had been among the many he and Raylan had argued over before deciding to come to Art’s to resign.

“But you’re assigned together here and have each other’s backs,” Art continued. “Isn’t that why Dan told me to put you together to start with? You two took out the Florida contingent of the vampire mafia network. Get to work on the Detroit end and I expect the director himself will keep you together. If he doesn’t, then you threaten to quit.”

“You all right with this?” Raylan asked him, letting hope slip into his voice.

“I am.” Tim grinned.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you all for reading and for leaving me feedback and kudos. All of it means more than you can know.

Next up is as yet untitled book 3 in this series. I begin plotting next week and as soon as I have a solid path, I’ll begin writing. Please feel free to drop me a line in comments or on Tumblr.

http://cher-locked.tumblr.com/
http://mouth-of-this-holler.tumblr.com/

xxox
-C

End Notes

As always, thank you for reading. I try to answer all comments so feel free to drop me a line if you have a thought, question, or whatever. Except complaints. Those are no fun. : )

Works inspired by this one

Secrets by bulma90_13, Why are you covered in blood? by Jonjo, Necromancer by bulma90_13

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