



Less Than Three Press

Midsummer Curse
By Megan Derr

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Midsummer Curse

A Tale of Midsummer's Night

Megan Derr

The sky was overcast, gloomy and gray, and quickly defeating any attempts the sun made to break through. It was barely fall, but he could already taste winter on the air. The cool weather was even now leeching the bright summer colors from everything, leaving the landscape looking flat, dull, and sleepy.

Brayton loved it. He could not wait for the snow. Any season requiring temperatures over seventy was highly overrated. Give him fall and winter. Snow, that was what he really wanted. Feet of it—so much it took 'til May for it to completely melt away, just like in the mountains where he'd grown up.

Geese fussed and pecked through the dry grass in the empty lot at the far side of the deserted parking lot. Fat, city-fed geese. They'd make a decent snack, but he could smell too many humans in the general vicinity. They weren't close enough he could see them, but too close for comfort. Not worth the trouble to shift, not when the fat geese probably tasted like stale french fries.

Instead, he lit a fresh cigarette and blew the smoke out with a sigh, leaning against the driver side of his '67 GTO, his baby. He patted the car with absent fondness, wishing they were driving home and not moldering here in an empty, dirty parking lot next to a long-dead restaurant in the middle of fuck nowhere. His appointment had better show up soon, or he was going to tell Carl he'd wasted his favor owed, tough luck.

He was just pulling out his cell phone when he saw a man walking on the side of the road, headed for him—where else could he be headed? Young, glasses, cute enough he supposed. Even at a distance, he smelled like every other gremlin Brayton had ever met: metal and machine oil. As he got closer, though, Brayton saw he was remarkably clean for a gremlin; nary a smudge of grease or oil on him, and the jeans, t-shirt, and jacket were clean and smelled more like detergent than metal. Huh. Who knew?

Pushing off his car, he dropped his cigarette and stamped it out, then stood and waited as the gremlin approached.

Minus the fact he smelled clean, the little thing really was like every other gremlin Brayton had ever met. Brayton was only average height himself, but the gremlin was half a head shorter. Skinny, fidgety, short black hair, and dark green eyes. His t-shirt was a faded gray with an even more faded logo for some garage, a beat up but well cared-for fleece-lined denim jacket, and an old pair of jeans that fit as only old jeans could.

Brayton tried not to sneer at the fleece; he was in a long-sleeved t-shirt and jeans, nothing more. But the damned thing didn't look like he had a scrap of fat anywhere on him; it was little surprise fifty-five degrees or so made him cold.

"So you're, uh, Ferdinand?" Brayton asked.

The gremlin winced. "Ferdy, please."

Like that was any better? Brayton didn't voice the thought. "Brayton. Carl sent me to help you."

Ferdy nodded and licked his lips, and Brayton didn't need to smell him to know he was nervous, but that nervousness did not entirely keep Brayton from liking what he saw. Brayton didn't fuck clients, though, and even if he did, itty bitty, starving-to-death-skinny, metallic smelling gremlins were not his thing.

"Yeah," Ferdy replied. "Sorry to be a both—"

"Forget it," Brayton said, not in the mood for pointless apologies and other polite conversation crap. "Carl said you were cursed, and I was the man to break it. What curse was put on you, and by whom?" He could smell there was a curse, though it was faint. That meant it was either poorly done, and there wasn't much to smell, or it was very well done and someone had mostly disguised any hint of it.

Ferdy flinched a bit and gave a weak laugh that sounded rather pathetic. "Umm—I touch any machine, and it immediately falls apart. *Any* machine. That's why I walked here."

Brayton stared at him, then back at his baby, then moved them several feet away. "Touch my car, and you die."

"Trust me," Ferdy said, flinching again, "I won't. I've already ruined two of my own cars. And everything else in and around the house." He sighed.

"So who did it? And why, so I know just how much of a headache this is going to be."

"I don't know," Ferdy said, sighing again. "It started happening yesterday. Carl was around; he noticed I was cursed, but—"

But Carl couldn't magic his way out a paper box. The man could smell magic like a bloodhound, but he possessed not so much as a drop. "Look, anyone who can curse a *gremlin* to fuck up *machines* is obviously too damned good at what he does for anyone's peace of mind. That means you pissed him off well enough that you should have noticed doing so."

"I don't know," Ferdy repeated. "I just run a fix-it shop. Everything that's come through my door lately, I've fixed or am in the process of fixing. No one has been mad at me about that, and the few times I've gone out, people have barely spoken to me, let alone long enough for me to manage to make any of them angry."

On a scale of one to ten, the little gremlin was already proving to be at least an eleven. Brayton bet by the end of it, he'd be more like a seventeen. "I guess we'd better scope you out," he said at last. "Breaking a curse isn't so simple; the person who cast it has to break it more often than not. I can't do much until I know more about the who and the why." He glanced at his car, then sighed and turned back to Ferdy. "I guess we're walking."

"Sorry."

"Forget it," Brayton said and led the way from the desolate parking lot.

They hadn't been walking more than twenty minutes when the wind abruptly shifted, and Brayton halted in his tracks. "No one told me a *pack* lived in this nowheresville town of yours."

Ferdy frowned. "Why does the pack matter?" His eyes widened in sudden comprehension. "Are you a werewolf?"

"What do you mean, am I werewolf? What do I look like? Yes, I'm a werewolf. Carl should have said that, and he should have told me there was pack here. They tend not to like stray wolves just wandering in unannounced." Especially wolves like him.

"Um—the Midsummer pack is pretty laid back. I'm sure they'd understand. Carl might not have known about them; they've only been here about a year, and he only passes through a couple of times a year."

"No pack is so laid back they just *don't care* when a lone wolf trots into their territory," Brayton growled. "No help for it, at this point. They probably smelled me long before I smelled them." Shrugging, resigned, he resumed walking.

A few minutes later, he realized he was either going to have to figure out how to walk slowly, or carry Ferdy the rest of the way if they wanted to get there any day that year. He scowled at the little gremlin, nose twitching at the mix of detergent and metal and sweat, a sharp, sour hint of anxiety and unhappiness, and a faint whiff of lingering sexual interest. There was something else, too, Brayton realized, now he was paying closer attention. He couldn't quite catch what it was, though. Not unappealing, exactly, but decidedly strange. Spicy? No. Not sweet either. Too hard to pin it down. Didn't matter, he supposed, but it bugged him.

"So where exactly are we going?" he asked.

"I live on the outskirts of Midsummer, about another two miles," Ferdy replied. "I own six acres of land with my house, shop, and garages on two acres; the rest is all field and a little pond."

"You say the curse started yesterday?"

"Yeah, but not right off. I'd stopped for lunch and went into town to Skip's diner. I was just starting to eat when everything went wrong. My stuff just fell apart—my watch, my mp3 player, my phone, my mini flashlight. Nothing but scrap and junk now. Ruined the first car, some other stuff; I'm afraid to go into town anymore." His shoulders hunched, and he stared down at his scuffed boots, kicking at the dirt. "Life has really sucked."

"I guess it would," Brayton said. "You can't remember anyone who might be pissed off at you that much? What about your boyfriend?"

Ferdy blanched. "How—"

Brayton bared his teeth in amusement. "I'm a wolf, itty-bitty; I can smell things."

"I don't have a boyfriend," Ferdy said, voice low, face red with humiliation. Then he said bitterly, "He's my ex now, and he wouldn't go to that much trouble."

Brayton grunted at that, but left it alone for the moment. In his experience, though, that kind of ex-boyfriend would be willing to go to a lot of trouble to hurt. "Alright, not the ex. Doing anything special, little gremlin? Some project that someone might not be thrilled you're working on?"

"Huh?" Ferdy said, looking up, flushing pink. He jerked his gaze hastily away again. "Um—just the old town hall clock tower. It's been busted for some fifty years. The whole building was practically condemned, but enough funds were recently raised. In the last week, the tower was made safe enough I was allowed in to start tinkering with the clockwork."

"What are you being paid for that out of the funds raised?"

"Huh?" Ferdy said again, looking up, and Brayton noticed his cheeks were still a bit flushed, and it wasn't really all that bad a look for the little thing. Kind of cute, really. And there went that stranger scent again; it was going to drive him crazy until he figured it out.

"I said, what are you getting paid for fixing the clock tower?"

"Nothing? I rarely take money. People just barter and stuff. The clock tower work is volunteer across the board. No one is getting paid."

Brayton frowned at that. He didn't know much about such things, but he knew enough. Repairs on an historical building? That included a clock tower at least a century old?

And what sort of pint-sized idiot traded good, hard, honest work for 'barter and stuff'?

"So no one would resent the cut you're getting. Sure it's not the boyfriend?"

"I don't have a boyfriend," Ferdy snapped, showing real anger for a moment. Then it just seemed to go right out of him, and he only looked humiliated. "He said—" He stopped, and clamped his mouth shut in a cute, stubborn little pout.

Brayton realized he'd just thought the gremlin cute again. It hadn't been *that* long since he'd gotten laid, surely.

"So, out of curiosity, if they were paying you, how much would work like that go for?"

"I don't know," Ferdy said, brow furrowing in annoyance.

It was almost—

God above, he was *not* going to think that word one more time. It was stricken from his vocabulary, starting now.

"So everyone is doing difficult, meticulous, no doubt has-to-be-historically-accurate work, and all for free? The funds for that must have been astronomical, even without having to pay people."

Ferdy shrugged. "The local top vampire, Sally, helped out a lot. She's got connections, stuff like that, and I think she contributed most of the cash even though she'd never admit it."

"A what? Godda—you mean to tell me this place is vamp territory? How did I miss that? The only top vamp I know in this area is hours from here."

"Um—she's pretty low key?"

Brayton could feel the beginnings of a headache. Something had better come along in this mess he could see forming to make all the hassle worthwhile. He started to tell Ferdy precisely that when he caught a whiff of wolf—close and getting closer.

Then the wolf slipped out of the woods, tongue lolling like he had not a care in the world, curious but unconcerned as he spotted Brayton.

Huh. The alpha had come himself instead of sending lackeys?

The wolf barked, sharp and short, a command to stay put, and then slipped back into the woods. A couple of minutes later, a young man stepped out of them, still pulling on a dark green zip up sweater. Brayton waited, tense, as the man drew close.

He really was remarkably young—not more than eighteen or nineteen, if he was a day. Handsome, in a kid next door kind of way. Smelled like medicine and of sex. Brayton wrinkled his nose. Mated, he suspected. Alphas usually were before or shortly after they came into their power.

And kid or not, an alpha was an alpha, and only an idiot would dismiss the power radiating off of him for a lack of age.

Purebred, too, Brayton realized. He hadn't seen another purebred in years, never mind one of comparable power—possibly greater. Interesting.

"Hey, Ferdy," the wolf greeted. "You didn't tell me you had a wolf."

Brayton growled. Ferdy flushed and looked completely lost. "I-uh-I don't. Carl asked him to help me. Only Carl didn't tell him wolves and vampires lived here."

"Oh," the wolf said, looking puzzled as he glanced at each of them before finally settling on Brayton. "Huh. Uh—my name is Lowell. I'm in charge of the Midsummer pack. There's six of us right now, five men and one woman, and she's six months pregnant—so I guess there's six and two thirds of us right now. Who are you?"

"Brayton Montgomery. I run solo."

Lowell tilted his head, regarding him quizzically. Then his expression suddenly cleared. "Oh! Peter was telling me about that the other day. You're a true lone, aren't you?"

Wasn't it obvious? Brayton's headache took definite hold of his temples. What sort of question was that for an *alpha* to ask?

"Yes," he said, itching to light a cigarette, but he didn't smoke around other people. "I'm a true lone."

"What do you do?" Lowell asked.

Brayton shrugged, never entirely certain how to answer that question. "I'm a jack of all trades, if I'm anything. Mostly, I'm a fair hand at solving paranormal riddles, like miniature gremlins who can't figure out why they've been inflicted with a nasty curse."

"I'm not miniature," Ferdy muttered.

Brayton rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say, itty-bitty."

Lowell laughed. "Small just means he can, uh, wiggle into places the rest of us can't go? And he's stronger than he looks; I've seen him lift some crazy heavy stuff like it was, uh, a sack of feathers? You should see what he was doing with the old clock tower."

Ferdy flushed and shrugged and looked down at his boots again. "I won't be able to do anything else if I can't figure out this stupid curse."

"Well, if Carl sent Mr. Montgomery here, then I'm sure you'll be okay by day's end, yeah?"

"Yeah," Ferdy agreed, but the doubt in his voice could not have been more obvious.

For some reason, it seriously irritated Brayton. The little thing could have a bit more faith—he'd driven all this way, hadn't he? He was walking instead of driving around in his honey, and he hadn't had a cigarette for the better part of an hour. "I'll figure out what's wrong," he snapped, barely keeping the growl from his voice. "It would help if I had something to go on. So far, I've got nothing but a bitchy ex and a moldering old clock tower."

Ferdy cringed.

Lowell frowned at Brayton. "Chill out a bit, yeah? There's no reason to be so mean."

Brayton sneered. "No alpha compulsion is going to work on me, and you should know that."

"Alpha has nothing to do with it," Lowell replied. "You're in my territory and all of Midsummer falls under my protection. Be nice."

Brayton shrugged, irritated. He wasn't being mean; it was hardly picking on the poor baby to say he had no idea yet who Ferdy had pissed off.

Lowell started at him, eyes hard and pensive, before he finally said, "I mean it, loner. Don't hurt or upset him."

"Fine," Brayton snarled "I'm not a damned monster. Gremlins are not my preferred flavor, even if I was. Break the curse, get out of town, I get it."

"No, I don't think you do," Lowell said, "but maybe you will soon. Call me Low. My mate is Peter, the local paranormal doctor. Stop by or call should you need us. Take care." With that, he was gone, vanishing back into the woods.

Brayton pinched the bridge of his nose and wished he were alone enough to have a cigarette. "Let's get going," he said at last, raking a hand through his shaggy, in-sore-need-of-a-cut, brown hair.

"Kay," Ferdy said quietly.

They walked in silence for a few more minutes before the way Ferdy was all but vibrating with curiosity finally compelled Brayton to snarl, "Oh, for the love of—ask, already, before biting your tongue kills you."

Ferdy jumped, but after a moment said, "You're like Low—not a normal wolf, I mean. Purebred, isn't that it?"

Brayton was silent then let out a brief sigh. "Yeah, purebred. It was sheer dumb luck my mama met my pop. I'm purebred and a true loner, which is even harder to find than your jailbait alpha."

Laughter erupted from Ferdy, quickly muffled as he slapped a hand over his mouth, and that strange, niggling scent flared stronger than ever, and Brayton really wished he could pin it down. He growled in frustration and tried to ignore it.

"He's probably close to twenty now?" Ferdy offered. "What does that mean, true loner?"

"Means I'm alpha of a pack of one," Brayton replied.

"Oh," Ferdy said, tone saying he didn't get anything Brayton had just said.

Normally, Brayton would have left him to suffer. He didn't give two shits about indulging someone's curiosity. But something about the honest, simple, no ulterior motives curiosity of his gremlin just got to him. "Wolves really suck at being alone. Humans do to, for the most part. They're social creatures. Flying completely solo doesn't really come natural, except for the occasional odd duck like me. When I need company, I find it. Otherwise, all I need is me, myself, and I."

"Oh," Ferdy said again, and this time sounded like he got it. "Gremlins tend to spend a lot of time alone."

"That's because gremlins see metal or cogs or gears and get interested in that the way other creatures get interested in potential lovers," Brayton replied with a snort. "Then they forget everything else around them. Not the same thing."

Ferdy flinched, almost as though actually struck. "Um—yeah—Kerry said the same thing."

Brayton winced. That wasn't what he'd meant; even he didn't mean to be that much of an ass. "Baby, if Kerry couldn't drag you away from your shiny bits of metal, he was doing something wrong."

In reply, Ferdy only did his whole shrug and look down thing, but his cheeks were flushed, and some of the bitter unhappiness had faded from his scent. Good. Less aggravating to be stuck with someone who always smelled so miserable.

"So what do you fix?" he asked.

"Machines," Ferdy replied. "If it's a machine, and I can get the tools and the parts, I can fix it." He smiled suddenly, and it was a damned cute grin.

God *damn* it. There went that word again.

"Once," Ferdy went on, "this woman in town brought me her dollhouse, and I made all the tiny appliances actually work—fridge, stove, everything. Wired the house and even figured out how to do running water. It's a perfect little working replica. I thought about doing something more elaborate, like a castle or an entire city or something, but I mean it's a *dollhouse*..." He shrugged.

Brayton smirked. "I can see where miniature would call to miniature. Whatever floats your boat, baby."

Ferdy flushed bright red again. "Stop calling me baby."

"Small, cute, and totally helpless," Brayton retorted. "Baby seems to work, you ask me. But 'itty-bitty' works too, if you prefer that."

"I have a name."

"Yeah, and if I were you, I'd pick 'baby'."

Brayton abruptly scowled at himself. Jesus H. Christ, was he flirting with the gremlin? That was definitely not an approved activity. Snack-sized gremlins were not his thing, and he was not flirting. That shit was stopping right now.

"I'm not a baby," Ferdy retorted and scowled at him, but it really was more of a cute pout—

Argh. Brayton really needed a damned cigarette.

Silence fell again after that until a house came into view. It was an older house, but well-maintained. He thought he saw an actual well off to one side, far back at the edge of the acre on which the house resided. It was painted a light, long-faded green with trim that had probably been white once but now seemed to be every color but. The porch was wide and wrapped around the house, empty save for some chairs, a porch swing, and a couple of tables cluttered with heaven alone knew what.

Well back beyond the house was a shop that could only be the workshop, and behind it were two bays, both currently empty. The modern-looking buildings were a stark, rather ridiculous contrast to the old-time house.

"My house," Ferdy said quietly. "Um. It's not much? But it's got everything you might need—at least, it did until I accidentally broke most of it." His voice had grown progressively tighter as he spoke, and

Brayton shot him a look, but Ferdy wasn't looking at him, attention on fumbling his keys from where they were clipped to his belt loop.

Unlocking the door, he led the way inside, shrugging out of his jacket and hanging it on a coat rack attached to the wall. He dropped his keys into a little metal dish on a scuffed and battered little table that was cluttered with umbrellas, old key chains, old keys, and other such miscellany.

He shot Brayton a hesitant smile, then moved further into the house, into what proved to be the living room as Brayton followed him.

A nice living room, at that—really nice. That was the sweetest damned entertainment center Brayton had ever seen. Not a scrap of it looked strictly store bought either, but then, no self-respecting gremlin would have ever left well enough alone when it came to electronics.

There was a massive wrap around sofa taking up most of the free space; it was made of dark brown suede and had a matching ottoman in place of a coffee table that was piled with books and papers, diagrams and schematics, bits and pieces of some unknown machine.

Smells struck Brayton hard—metal, machine oil, all kinds of food, coffee, beer, and sex. The last irritated him, though he could not say why. Guess the ex hadn't been an ex very long.

All in all, it was a tidy two story house complete with living room, a study, a rec room, a work room, and four bedrooms upstairs. Everything was cluttered with the leavings of a machine-obsessed gremlin, though the piles of clutter were remarkably tidy, for all that. A relatively neat and tidy gremlin—who knew?

Brayton was toying with a gutted cuckoo clock when he heard a choked, muffled noise from the study. Abandoning the clock, he strode through the rooms to the study at the back left corner of the house.

Ferdy stood at a cluttered table, pushing with obvious misery at a pile of junk that looked like it had once been some manner of mechanical toy. The look on Ferdy's face was one of abject misery; it was on the verge of tears, really. Ferdy must have touched the toy and caused it to fall apart.

It struck Brayton then, like a sucker punch, just how really and truly awful the curse must be for Ferdy. Gremlins couldn't help themselves when it came to machines and all. They needed to tinker and build the way vampires needed blood, the way Brayton needed ... hell, he didn't even know.

Breaking everything he touched instead of fixing it must be a living hell for Ferdy.

He was across the room before he even really knew what he was doing, grabbing Ferdy and turning him, pulling him into a tight embrace. "We'll break the case," he said gruffly.

Ferdy said nothing, but his skinny little arms wrapped round Brayton's waist— And Low was right, there was a hell of a lot more strength there than the starving schoolgirl build implied. It was kind of hot, actually, but no way was he going there.

Suddenly Ferdy was squirming away, flushed with embarrassment. "You can sleep here, if you need a place. If you want to bring your car, there should be an empty bay out back—and I promise I won't touch it."

"Sure," Brayton agreed, because he really did not want to leave his baby sitting in that empty lot and staying here made more sense than wasting time tracking down an inn. "I'll be back shortly, then."

"I can order—" Ferdy broke off and looked miserable again. "I can go and get us pizza, if you want."

Brayton started to move forward, then realized he had every intention of kissing that misery away, and that would not do at all—what the hell was wrong with him? He shook his head at Ferdy instead and drawled, "You stay here and try to figure out why someone would curse you, baby. I'll get my car and the food."

Ferdy scowled at him. "My name is not 'baby'."

"I'm not calling you 'Ferdy', baby, so get used to it." He left the room, avoiding further attempts to discuss the matter. In the entryway, he cracked the door open. From the pocket of his jeans, he pulled out a small bag that folded down to pocket sized, but opened up to a small bag perfect for things like his keys and wallet. Necessities stowed, he stripped down, neatly folding his clothes and leaving them on a clean bit of floor.

Then he shifted, shaking himself and growling as he settled into his wolf form. His fur was a brown-gold, same as his hair though much rougher and more varied in shading. His eyes remained green, the sage color of them nothing he'd ever encountered in another wolf beyond his father.

Nudging the door the rest of the way open, he carefully took up his travel bag in his mouth, and padded from the house and down the street, breaking into a brisk run once he reached the open road. He made it back to his car in good time.

Moving around behind it, out of the sight of traffic, he dropped his bag and shifted back to human form. Rolling and stretching his muscles, he fished his keys from his bag and walked to his trunk, unlocking it and grabbing a spare set of clothes. He dressed quickly, then slammed the trunk shut and went to retrieve his wallet, folding the bag up and shoving it back into his pocket.

Unlocking his car, he slid behind the wheel, closed the door, and started his baby up. She purred and rumbled for him, and he patted her affectionately before driving out of the deserted lot. His GTO was a honey; she'd been little more than junk when he'd found her, but he'd restored her to her true glory, and she never let him down.

Reaching town, he pulled into the parking lot of a local pizza joint and then simply sat, bemused by the scents flooding him. The town was rife with paranormals; more than he could completely track and pick out. He'd wager at least half the town was paranormal, and to glance about, it seemed the humans were completely aware and didn't give a damn.

He wasn't certain what to make of that. He'd never known such a thing to happen, not anywhere, and he'd been all over the fucking country and across the borders a few times. Humans were annoying, bar none. Well, bar almost none. There were a few worth tolerating.

Speaking of annoying humans, that reminded him. Pulling out his cell, he slid it open and punched one of his speed dial numbers. He drummed his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel as the phone rang and rang until, finally, an obnoxiously cheerful voice sang out an entirely too bright greeting.

Brayton growled. "You didn't tell me there were wolves here. Or a top vamp. Or that this town is weird. I suspect you very carefully did not to tell me anything useful at all, in fact, and I would like to know why right now, Carl."

"I thought I'd surprise you."

"You're an asshole. You know damn good and well wolves don't like me as a general of thumb. Were you just hoping I'd finally get my ass kicked?"

Carl laughed. "Nah. Low's not like that. He's mellow unless Stacey Cropper is stupid enough to show his face in Midsummer again."

Brayton growled again, this time with real threat in it, at the sound of that name. Stacey was bad news, end sentence. He was as crooked as the day was long and twice the asshole.

"Seriously," Carl went on. "You'd like Low. Sally, too, though she's probably too happy for you."

"Shut up," Brayton said and pulled out his smokes. He lit one, rolling his window all the way down, and took a long drag. "I don't suppose you can actually tell me something useful about this mess you dragged me into? Itty-bitty swears up and down no one hates him this much, but a curse this cruel could only come from hate or fear—and a goddamn fly would not be afraid of that pint-sized gremlin."

Carl sniggered. "I knew you'd like him."

Brayton pulled the phone away from his ear and gave it a withering look. Putting it back in place, he said, "I have no idea what you're talking about." He very carefully did not think about the odd, elusive, but not unappealing, scent that nagged at him, or the way he'd hugged Itty-bitty, or anything else like that.

Snickering some more, Carl replied, "Whatever, man. Anyway, is it that someone is scared of him, or scared of what he can do?"

"Thought of that," Brayton said shortly. "After I eliminate the ex, I'll look further into it. It can't be coincidence that shortly after he started work on this clock tower he mentioned he lost any ability to do so. Does that tower have any special history?"

"Nah," Carl said. "It's remarkably free of such tales, oddly enough. If there are any skeletons in its closets, they've been long forgotten by even Sally."

"Hm," Brayton said absently. "Well, unless he's working on something else, I can't see what else would provoke someone to be that fucking mean to a compact-model gremlin. I just wondered if you knew anything useful for once."

"He's a quiet little guy. Could be filthy rich, but he does everything practically for free. That boyfriend of his—it kind of shocked everyone when he went for Ferdy."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Kerry is a bit of a wild card, and by a bit, I mean any town but Midsummer would have locked that sorry ass goblin up ages ago. I know Low wouldn't mind chomping him, but he seemed to chill out after he shacked up with Ferdy. Got together oh, all of a year ago? Give or take."

Hmm. That was possibly interesting timing. Could be coincidence; no need to make anything of it yet—but Brayton made note. "As usual, Carl, you know too much for a man who never stays anywhere longer than two days," he said dryly.

"People love talking to me," Carl replied.

"Something like that," Brayton said, finishing his cigarette. "Thanks. Anything else?"

"Ferdy doesn't deserve this, Brayton. He's a good guy. Lonely, grew up alone. He was another wanderer, like so many others in town, until he found Midsummer. Help him and kick the ass of whoever did that to him."

Brayton nodded unthinkingly, then said, "You know I will."

Carl laughed softly. "Yeah, I know. Don't get arrested doing it, lone wolf."

"Shut up."

"Later."

"Later."

"Oh! Wait! One more thing—"

"What?" Brayton snapped.

"He'd be good for you."

"What—what the hell?"

But the line had gone dead. Brayton snarled and growled softly, then slid his phone shut and shoved it back into his jeans. Muttering curses and obscenities that would make his mama blush and cuff him, Brayton climbed out of the car and slammed the door shut.

He strode into the pizza place, sneezing at the overwhelming flood of scents. Restaurants and all always did that to him. Sneezing again, he finally got control of it and strode up to the counter. A huge, heavily-muscled human stood at the counter, sporting the sort of annoying cheerful smile that drove Brayton crazy. It was not natural for people to be so *cheerful* all the time.

"You're Ferdy's wolf, aren't you?" the man asked abruptly.

"What?" Brayton said, almost barking the words. That was the third damned time someone had said he belonged to Ferdy. He was a lone wolf. He belonged to no one. Definitely not to some snack-sized gremlin ready to jump at his own shadow.

"I was talking to Peter on the phone, and then Bobby saw you driving past and called me and said—"

"I'm here to help Ferdy, yes," Brayton bit out, chafing at the busybody nature of small towns. It just...he didn't like it. Ferdy, really? It didn't suit, and he didn't like using it. "I need two pizzas."

"Breadsticks and soda, too, and the cinnamon sticks. I owe Ferdy, and least I can do to help out why he's cursed like that. Ferdy always gets the same thing—pepperoni, mushrooms, jalapenos. What did you want on the other?"

"Just pepperoni."

"Be about fifteen minutes. Want to wait, or I can just bring it out there."

"I'll wait," Brayton said and started to reach for his wallet, then remembered the guy had said he had it covered. "Thanks." Turning, he went outside and leaned against his car, pulling out his pack of cigarettes and lighting one up.

Then he stewed over the gremlin problem. He pulled a long drag on his cigarette, pondering. It was far too early to be certain of anything—to even make a guess as to anything—but the clock tower nagged at him. Looking up, he glanced around until he could see the top of it across town, a dull, tired looking building, the hands of the clock all hung down at six, too worn out to move elsewhere. The rest of the building was cluttered and covered and ugly, too busy being fixed to look good. Like his mama always said though, the only way to clean was to start by making a bigger mess.

Brayton finished his cigarette and stamped it out on the pavement. His to-do list for the night seemed to be run Kerry to ground, then go scope the clock tower. So much for sleep. Going back inside, he saw his food just being gathered together. "Thanks again."

"Sure. Tell Ferdy thanks for fixing my truck. This town would be lost without him, I swear."

Grunting some reply, Brayton gathered the food up and made to leave.

"Anyway," the man continued, "I hope you can help him?"

"I can," Brayton replied, then hesitated. "What can you tell me about this Kerry everyone keeps mentioning? Where does he live?"

"Wherever he falls," the man said flatly. "Ferdy was the best thing that ever happened to Kerry, but Kerry was the worst thing to ever happen to Ferdy."

"I see. So where am I likeliest to find him?"

"In a bar or the pool hall."

Brayton nodded. "Thanks."

He left, settled the food in the passenger seat, and drove back to Ferdy's place.

When he arrived, however, a new car was in the driveway. The scent that clung to it was passingly familiar, something, Brayton realized, that he'd already smelled before in Ferdy's house. One of the scents that had been attached to lingering traces of sex.

Brayton slammed the car door shut, leaving the food in the car for the time being, and stomped into the house. The first thing he smelled was Ferdy's unhappiness, sour sweat, and the glaring lack of that elusive scent he still couldn't place. Growling, he moved through the rooms to the workshop.

Ferdy leaned against one of two wide windows in the room, arms crossed over his chest, and glaring up at a man doing his damndest to loom.

"Now, Ferdy, you don't want to keep arguing—"

"You're right, I don't," Ferdy said. "You said good riddance. I said that was fine by me. There's nothing else to say."

"If you just said you were sorry, I'd be willing to take you back and give you a second chance."

Ferdy said nothing, only sighed and looked away. The slinky, slimy blonde reached out a hand to draw his fingers down Ferdy's cheek.

Oh, no. That wouldn't do, Brayton decided. No one was touching Ferdy. Stalking across the room, he snatched the offending hand and squeezed not quite hard enough to break it. Then he grabbed the squealing bastard by the back of his shirt and tossed him to the other side of the room.

"You must be Kerry," Brayton drawled.

Kerry sneered. "Who the fuck are you?"

"I keep hearing you're a worthless bastard. Goblins usually are, my experience. Are you worthless enough to curse a gremlin?"

"Goblins don't do magic," Kerry said stiffly. "Ain't my thing."

Brayton snorted in amusement. "What I hear, anything requiring effort ain't your thing. You ain't welcome here. Get out, or I'll forcibly remove you."

"Not your house," Kerry said, words clipped, cold, angry, the precise opposite of Brayton's rolling mountain drawl. "And it's none of your damned business what goes on between me and my boyfriend, asshole."

"Ex," Ferdy said then, pushing away from the window he'd been leaning against, hands falling to his hips. "You're my ex, and I really want you gone. So go."

Kerry sneered and said, "You'll come around. I'm the only good? thing that ever happened to you, Ferdy. Who else is going to put up with the fact you hide in machines because you're no good at anything else?" His implication could not have been plainer, even if he hadn't added the leer.

Annoyance quickly moving to truly pissed off, Brayton growled again. "I seriously doubt that Ferdy is the bad lay in this room."

In reply, Kerry only laughed. Beside Brayton, Ferdy flinched and recoiled. Brayton contemplated simply smashing Kerry's face in, but he hated the way Ferdy withdrew more. Reaching out, he yanked Ferdy close and bent, kissing him hard. Ferdy froze for a moment, but then began to respond with startled enthusiasm.

And definite skill. Brayton's growling eased to a pleased rumble, and he held his Itty-bitty a bit more gently, tugging him closer and easing the kiss, making it softer, slower, deeper, and delightfully more thorough. Brayton rumbled softly, fingers sliding over fabric, pushing beneath to get at smooth skin.

The sound of something breaking snapped him from it, reminding him abruptly that they were not alone. He pulled away, reminding himself that he was on a job, he wasn't in the habit of kissing clients, and gremlins weren't his thing. Brayton blinked at Ferdy, whose eyes were dark, lips wet and swollen from being thoroughly kissed, and the skinny little body wasn't all that—

Pulling futher away, Brayton turned back to dickhead Kerry, who stood in the doorway, obviously ready to start some shit.

Brayton smirked. "Like I said, Ferdy ain't the one in the room who's a bad lay."

Though Kerry obviously wanted to stay and hold a violent discussion on the matter, he was just smart enough—or coward enough—not to challenge a werewolf. He left.

Sighing in annoyance, Brayton said, "Now the pizza is cold."

Ferdy stood, silent and red-faced for a moment, but then seemed to realize that Brayton had said something. He turned an even deeper red and coughed. "Um—sorry, you, uh got mixed in that. I didn't think he'd come around here again. You—thanks," he finished awkwardly.

Brayton shrugged and tried very hard not to remember every nuance of that remarkably fine kiss—or how that damned scent had returned, better and stronger than ever. What the hell was it? Why did it feel more and more like he was missing something where that scent was concerned?

He brushed the strange notion aside with another shrug and went to fetch the pizza from his car. Carrying it all back inside, he then had to juggle around piles of crap until he finally unearthed a suitable table and spread the food out.

The sound of movement drew him, and he looked up to see Ferdy hovering in the doorway.

"Come and eat," Brayton ordered, then added, "You could use some meat on your damned bones. Do you mean to look like you're starving to death? Is that the popular look with gremlins? I thought they usually had a bit more heft to them."

"I eat," Ferdy said, doing that trying-to-sowl thing that was really just a pout.

"Yeah, probably barely enough to feed a kitten," Brayton retorted.

Ferdy poked at the breadsticks. "Like it matters what I do or do not eat?"

Brayton started to say of course it mattered, but realized how ridiculous that was. Ferdy was right; it shouldn't matter to him. He was just here to do a job, a job which, unfortunately, did not include more kisses—

He growled and took a bite of pizza, wondering what in the hell was wrong with him. Clients were not his thing. Half-pints were not his thing. Skittish, starving, half-pint clients were definitely not his thing.

But there'd been nothing skittish about that kiss and enough strength in Ferdy's grip to hint that a hell of a good time might be possible, and gremlins *were* damned good with their hands, and it *really* was not helping at all that Ferdy clearly wanted him.

Growling, Brayton gave up on his pizza and left the room, biting out a brief, "I'll be back." In the front hall, he opened the door a crack then stripped off his clothes. Folding them up neatly, he set them with the clothes he had early discarded. This sort of trip, he would not be taking his wallet and other essentials with him. Brayton weighed his options.

The strong, lingering scent of Kerry made him bare his teeth in a snarl, and he really wished that tracking the bastard down and tearing out his throat could be considered a prudent action. Setting the tempting thought aside, he picked up a steady pace and made for the town proper. It would have been more practical, perhaps, to take the car, but he had energy to burn and his wolf form would afford him several advantages while he explored the old town hall.

He made it into town in good time, tensing from habit and moving cautiously as he reached people. Normally, he would go nowhere near a town while in wolf form, but this town was more than a little strange.

It really was so *strange* he thought, moving through town, weaving around people who paid him no more mind than passing curiosity. There were no shrieks, no threats, no stench of fear—nothing but curiosity over a stranger. Midsummer, huh? He'd have to remember the place if he was ever back in this area again.

Continuing on, he didn't pause until he reached the old town square, a picturesque little small town kind of place right out of the movies—benches, flowers, quaint little shops, cobblestones, a fountain, everything. It was rather obnoxious.

And looming over all of it, the final postcard touch, was the clock tower. In older days, had they used this same spot to burn paranormals under the crime of 'witchcraft'? How long *had* the top vamp in the area lived here?

Irrelevant, Brayton reminded himself. He focused on the job at hand and headed into the mess of construction clutter that spread like a blight on the postcard setting. When the work was done, though, he bet it would all be perfect enough for a Christmas card.

Padding his way over, through, under, and around the mess, he finally slipped inside the hall. Access to the clock tower was the door straight back, and someone had left it slightly ajar. Good. If they hadn't, he'd have had to shift back and hope he could get it open—all the while stark naked.

Nosing the door open, he climbed up what proved to be stone steps. His claws clicked on the stones, echoing along the stairwell. A wash of smells assaulted him as he reached the top of the tower and made him sneeze hard, three times in a row. Old smells of dust, mold, decaying wood, old stone, rotted fabric, old brick. There were new smells too: people, normal and not. His gremlin's smell was the strongest, metal and machine oil and that elusive, spicy-sweet but not scent that seemed to be simply Ferdy and no one else in the world, and it really did smell better every time he inhaled it.

He frowned over that, taken aback by the fervor of the stray thought. Obviously running about as a wolf was not expending energy enough *or* expunging thoughts of fucking his little gremlin until he screamed—

Brayton whined, frustrated and annoyed and confused. This wasn't normal behavior for him; he was a loner—a true lone. He only fucked other wanderers, other loners. Itty-bitty was obviously a settle down, stay in one place, community and family type. Brayton had no business going anywhere near that, even if he didn't have a policy in place about mixing business with pleasure. He'd learned the hard way it was best to keep the two strictly separate.

Whining again, hating that he felt confused, that he could not forget that stupid kiss he never should have stolen, Brayton tried to shove the thoughts away and attempted yet again to focus on his job. Putting nose to the ground, he started to poke around.

The guts of the tower clock mechanism were all over the place, along with tools, oil, rags, books, diagrams, and page after page of notes. Looked like itty-bitty wasn't simply repairing the thing; he was all but building it over again from scratch and clearly makes notes to put to use elsewhere.

Gremlins.

Rumbling in amusement, Brayton pushed and prodded at everything, nosing through the gremlin-organized mess—

And sneezed with so much force it hurt.

Then the substance he'd inhaled began to actually hit him, setting fire to his blood in a way that made Brayton whine and whimper in dismay and fear. Bolting away, he raced back down the stairs, fighting the madness clawing at him. Reaching the main door, he closed it, trapping himself inside—he hoped he was trapping himself.

Moving unsteadily back up the stairs, swaying on his feet now, he stumbled to the center of the roof and gathered enough strength and will to throw his head back and howl as loudly as he possibly could in warning, pleading for help, hoping the pack would hear him.

He howled until it became too difficult to manage, until he was keeping control of himself by the barest of threads. Then he curled up in a little ball on the floor, whimpering, whining as he fought the madness-inducing effects of extremely potent wolfsbane that someone had secreted away amongst the clutter upstairs.

The arrival of at least four wolves drew his attention, and he began to growl against his will. He trembled with the effort it took to hold himself still; the arrival of another alpha helped to calm him, the weight of an equal's presence steadying.

It kept him under control just long enough for the strange non-wolf to approach him and draw out a syringe. He smelled like wolf, like the alpha, and like medicine, and then the odd wolf was stabbing him with the needle and injecting him with something. Brayton whimpered in pain and relief as the world went black.

~~*

He woke with a throbbing headache and roiling stomach, and all the strange smells in the air did not help.

There was one scent, however, that separated itself quite clearly from the others and managed to calm him a bit—the strange, elusive, addictive scent that was Ferdy.

Slowly sitting up, Brayton stared bemused at Itty-bitty stretched out on the floor with his back to the wall, facing the bed, arms folded and his head drooping at an angle that would not be fun for his neck when he woke up.

Hadn't anyone thought to get the idiot a chair? Or, better still, made him go to bed? What was Itty-bitty even doing here anyway? And where was here? Brayton bit back several choice words and raked his hair from his face.

He wrinkled his nose in concentration as he sifted through all the strange smells. Lowell. Someone who was likely Lowell's mate, given the way their scents combined. Medicine. Food. Coffee. Best guess, he was in Lowell's house. That didn't explain Ferdy's presence. Brayton started to say or do something to wake him up when he heard and smelled someone drawing close. The mate.

The door opened, and Brayton realized he'd already seen the man—the odd smelling man who'd injected him, and now he did remember Lowell saying something about his mate being the local doc for paranormals. He was handsome enough, very small town doctor looking, with the glasses and the coat. "You smell like wolf and yet not," Brayton said, nose twitching over the puzzle.

"Yes," the doctor said, but offered no explanation. "My name is Peter, and, as I'm sure you've already deduced, Low's mate. You're Brayton, right? You got hit bad by some really good wolfsbane. You should be mostly fine now, though I wouldn't eat any heavy foods for the next twenty-four hours. The antidote I gave you contained trace elements of 'tincture of the moon'."

Brayton grimaced but nodded. The havoc that would have wreaked on his body, it would have also forced out the wolfsbane he'd inhaled. When he found the bastard responsible for doing such a dangerous, stupid thing, he would beat him to a pulp. "Thanks, doc."

"Sure," Peter said and chuckled softly. "Low is just as pleased as you about the wolfsbane. He sent the pack out to ask questions while he and Sally went back to the clock tower. They've been a couple of hours, and no one has called, so I guess they're still busy looking."

Nodding, Brayton jerked a thumb at Ferdy. "What's he doing there?"

"He heard the howling and came by a little while ago to ask what had happened. When he realized what happened to you, he insisted on hanging around." Peter shrugged and smiled faintly. "He's quite upset you were hurt trying to help him, the poor thing. I thought I'd convinced him to go to bed, but it looks like he snuck right back over here."

"What time is it? How long was I out?"

"It's almost midnight," Peter replied. "You've been out not quite five hours; remarkable recovery time for a wolf bit by bane, though you are a purebred alpha."

Brayton grunted. "I'd have been better off a mongrel." Being of thinner wolf blood, mongrels were not quite as severely hit by things like silver and bane, though they were still hit pretty hard.

"Mmm," Peter agreed, "but more likely to have succumbed to the madness. Whatever the case, you are mostly better now. Ferdy brought your things, and I've got some broth and bread prepared if you want to give it a try."

Brayton scowled at that; he'd never gotten to eat much of the pizza either. Broth and bread? If he were a wolf right then, he'd have whined.

Peter laughed and pushed his glasses up his nose. "Oh, my. What a kicked puppy. I'll be back." Still laughing, all the harder at the disgusted look Brayton shot him, Peter left to get the promised food, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Stupid bane. Brayton wanted real food. Heaving a sigh, he glanced toward Itty-bitty and froze when he saw Ferdy was stirring. Sleepy eyes blinked at him, then snapped open. Ferdy hastily stood up, only managing to trip over himself in the process, tumbling forward to land half on the floor, half on the bed, face the color of a fresh-painted fire engine. "Sorry. Uh—are you feeling better? I'm really, really sorry—they said it happened in the tower—and they had to get Sally to go through it and then Peter had to give you silver—"

"Shush, baby," Brayton cut in, cupping Ferdy's chin in one hand and putting a thumb over his lips to stem the flow of words. "I'm fine. Someone hid bane up there, yeah. It was probably to keep me, or rather wolves, from smelling something up there. Better, less dangerous ways to do it, though." His mind turned it all over and over, but the thoughts scattered as he heard a flood of racket from downstairs.

"Umm—" Ferdy started to speak, then stopped, and Brayton only then realized that he was still holding Ferdy's chin.

He let go and decided he'd been laying around long enough, but the sudden smack of cold air as he whipped the blankets away drew sharp attention to the fact he was naked. Brayton whipped the blankets back over as Ferdy moved to get out of the way, cheeks still a livid pink, and really, smelling lust on the air while he was naked and in a bed and with Ferdy that close—

Really, he was going to have to kill someone before the day was over.

"I brought your stuff," Ferdy said. "It's, uh, there." Then he bolted from the room.

Muttering curses that would have had his mama going at him with a bar of soap, Brayton dragged himself out of bed and toward the tidy pile of stuff set on top of the bureau. Dressed, he felt slightly more together, if not altogether settled. He shoved his wallet and phone and keys into their respective pockets.

He had the sinking feeling he was going to feel restless and scattered until he caved and pounded a certain Itty-bitty into the nearest suitable surface.

Carefully putting *that* imagery aside, he yanked the door open and found his way downstairs. Low had returned and stood with Peter and Ferdy in the living room. Brayton looked at Low and asked, "What's wrong?"

"The wolfsbane was only one of several things up there to keep out a whole slew of paranormal creatures should they poke around too much and find the body that was beneath the floorboards where the clockwork was before Ferdy tore it all apart."

"A body that Ferdy likely would have found at some point," Brayton continued the thought. "That explains the curse. It was probably another booby trap."

"Probably," Low agreed. "Curses take a while to set, don't they?"

"Yeah, especially if it's an open curse" Brayton said. "My impression 'til now was of a close, or personal, curse, and even those take a few hours to set after being cast. But an open curse takes even longer, so if it only started working yesterday, it could have actually struck as many as forty-eight hours beforehand. It's definitely the only way I can think of to keep a gremlin from mucking about with all those lovely, shiny bits of metal." He smirked at Ferdy, who only tried to scowl at him but, as per usual, failed miserably. "Why keep the body there and not bury it?"

But no one even needed to answer that question. If the body had been hidden in the clock tower, then the victim had likely died very close to it, making the tower the nearest and best hiding place. Once hidden, getting it anywhere else in a town like Midsummer would have been impossible.

So, better to simply fortify the tower against any and all possible threats. Brayton wondered how many other people had been victim of nasty booby traps. Given that precious few of them would have been poking around with permission or good intentions, they probably hadn't said a word to anyone and instead slunk off elsewhere to get the problem fixed.

Whoever was behind it all obviously had underestimated just how devastating such a curse would be to a gremlin. He had *also* not fully understood the effects of wolfsbane—a less experience wolf would have caused untold amounts of damage after snorting as much of it as Brayton had. Anyone else, they very likely would be dealing with a slew of new wolves and a few bodies right now.

"We need to figure out who's responsible for this before worse happens," Brayton said. "Did you identify the body?"

"Yes," Low said. "Sally knew her immediately. A girl everyone thought ran off five years ago like she was always saying she would. Her neck was snapped, and she must have been put in the floor boards shortly thereafter."

"So a girl everyone knew? Anyone in particular?"

"Too many," Peter said quietly. "She came here a lot to get patched up, medical treatment, food. She had bad taste in men—in customers, I should say. You won't find anyone willing to admit it, but she turned tricks for a goodly number of men in town, and none of the nice ones. She tried to repay me with 'favors' a few times, but I never accepted. She was a good kid, despite everything. She didn't deserve to be murdered and buried beneath floorboards."

Brayton growled. "If the place has been cleared out, I'm going back. No one is good enough to leave zero traces of himself. If there's any evidence, I'll find it."

Low frowned. "Sally and I cleared out all the traps we could find, but it's still too dangerous. No one is going up there."

"I don't take orders, not even from a pack alpha," Brayton retorted.

Eyes flashing, Low tensed and shifted his weight, and Brayton braced himself to meet him head on—

"Oh, my god—" Peter's jaw dropped, eyes popping in disbelief.

Ferdy looked equally stunned from where he'd been standing silently off to one side, and he drew closer without even really seeming to realize he was doing it. "They—they look alike."

Brayton and Low both froze, then whipped around to face Peter.

"Peter?" Low asked.

Shaking his head slowly back and forth in wonder, Peter pointed at them. "You—I cannot believe—Low, the two of you bear a striking resemblance. I didn't notice until now because it's not very strong. It comes out more when the wolf is to the fore. Your eyes are dark and light versions of each other, the nose, the jaw... you're a sligher, much prettier version of our new friend here, but there is definitely a resemblance. I dare say it's a family resemblance."

"What—but—that—" Low continued to sputter, staring in wide-eyed disbelief until Peter abruptly stepped forward and pulled him into a tight embrace. For some stupid reason, it was only then that it

struck Brayton that Peter had roughly a decade on Low—but they were perfectly matched. Mate was mate, after all.

After a moment, Peter looked up at him, still holding Low close. "Do you not see it?"

"I don't see how it's—" Brayton paused and realized abruptly that it was possible. "Nelly. Holy shit on a shingle, you're Nelly's kid, aren't you?"

"I don't—um—I don't know," Low said, looking suddenly like a lost kid. "I'm—I've always been alone, until Peter found me, literally, on the side of the road. Who's Nelly?"

"Aunt Nelly," Brayton said, running it over and over in his mind. It was all too possible. He had a cousin. Man, wait until Mama and Pop found out. "My pop's baby sister. She was, um, always something of a loose cannon." She'd also wanted everything to do with men and nothing to do with children. He suspected it was better not to say that part aloud. "Wait until I call my folks, they'll die to find out they got a nephew."

Low gave a shaky laugh and only clung more tightly to Peter.

Feeling suddenly awkward watching the couple, Brayton decided it was time to vacate the room. He strode out and almost immediately located the kitchen. There was a tray on the breakfast nook in one corner on which was set a bowl of chicken broth and a hunk of bread.

Snearing at it, he stomped over to the fridge in search of real food.

"Um—shouldn't you not be eating that kind of food?" Ferdy said from behind him.

Brayton growled and yanked the fridge open. "I'll eat whatever I want."

"You're still sick, though," Ferdy replied, and he sounded so wretched and guilty and smelled so unpleasantly sour that Brayton slammed the fridge shut and turned around. He closed most of the space between them and flicked Ferdy's nose. "I'll be fine, baby. Nothing time and real food won't fix."

"Stop calling me that," Ferdy said with one of his pout-scowls, rubbing at his nose. "I'm not anyone's baby, and I'm not *that* small."

Brayton smirked. "I told you, it's 'itty-bitty' or 'baby' but that's all the choice you get."

"Why does it matter to you if I have a crappy name? Once we find the murderer, it's back to business, and you'll be gone."

"I'm not calling you Ferdy or Ferdinand," Brayton said stubbornly, ignoring all the aggravating points about that question. He smirked. "It's much more fun to call you baby, especially when you get all pouty like that."

Ferdy glared, but the flush to his cheeks only went a deeper rose, and the embarrassment was such a sweet contrast to the indignation that made his eyes spark.

Brayton rumbled, a deep, warm sound, and scarcely even realized he was moving, cupping the back of Ferdy's head and tilting him just so.

The kiss was even better than he remembered, and he did love the way that, pliant as he was, Ferdy still gave as good as he got. Pliant, but definitely not meek, even if he could barely string words together. Rumbling louder, growling just a bit, Brayton shifted to grab tighter hold of Ferdy's hair with one hand, sliding the other arm down to wrap tightly around Ferdy's waist, pulling until they were flush together.

Their clothes really needed to be out of the way so he could fuck Ferdy six ways to Sunday and stake his claim—

"Should we leave them alone?" asked a laughing voice.

Brayton jerked back and snarled briefly, annoyed with himself, with Ferdy, with everyone, but he stopped short as he took in the most fascinating top vampire he'd ever seen in his life. Good lord in heaven, how many colors was the woman wearing?

"Hullo," the vampire said cheerfully. "My name is Sally. You must be Brayton."

"Hello, Sally," Brayton said dryly. "What do you want?"

Sally grinned. "We're here to speak with Low and company. Didn't realize company had better things to do."

Brayton finally noticed then that two other men stood just behind Sally—werewolves. They eyed him, curious and cautious. Mates, by the smell. Was the entire bloody pack comprised of gay, mated wolves? Like flocked to like, he supposed.

Christ almighty, he hoped there wasn't a single floating around somewhere, and he wasn't going to stumble unwittingly into a good-smelling wolf and...

Oh, hell. Christ on a pogo stick. Brayton shifted his gaze to Ferdy, running through all he knew of wolves and mates.

It was something no one could as of yet fully explain, though the world was rife with people eager to try and extremely dry papers discussing the matter ad nauseam. To date, the popular theory was that somewhere way back when man and wolf first mingled, a lot of things went screwy and 'wolves mate for life' became 'werewolves mate really fast and really permanent and without much choice in the matter'.

He had to be wrong. But he had the gut-clenching feeling that he was all too right.

At least he knew that damned scent now, and had it really taken him *this* long to place it? *Like smelling the cinnamon meant to go on the apples* his mama had always said. Which, in turn, had always prompted his father to reply *I'd rather you come and put some sugar on my apples*. That had always gotten his father smacked with whatever his mother was holding at the time.

A smell like no other. Odd behavior. Extreme possessiveness. Horny went without saying. The list of symptoms went on and on. Kerry was probably lucky Brayton *hadn't* killed him. Any younger and instinct probably would have overridden his thick-headedness.

Damn it.

Brayton stared at Ferdy, completely disinterested in the other occupants of the kitchen. A shy, doormat, pint-sized gremlin with the world's cutest pout and a hell of a kiss.

Ferdy, suddenly realizing he was being watched, flushed and scowled. "What?"

"Nothing, baby," Brayton drawled, just to see the pout. He smirked when he got it, and flicked Ferdy's nose again, before finally deciding to address the matter at hand and then deal with the unexpectedness of finding a mate.

Turning his full attention back to the werewolves, he asked, "Who are you?"

The slightly taller of the two stepped forward, drawing even with Sally, and said, "I'm Connor. That's Antonio." He jerked his thumb at the other man. "My mate. I'm Peter's brother, Toni's our cousin. Your name is Brayton, but that's about all Low told us. Who and what are you?"

Brayton bared his teeth in an amused smile. "Brayton Montgomery is the name, and I bug you because I'm a purebred true lone. It would also seem I'm Low's cousin, though obviously not the kissing kind." He smiled sweetly when they both glared at him. "I'm a troubleshooter and problem solver by occupation, and I'm only telling you any of that because I feel like it, not because it's any of your business."

Antonio stirred. "What do you mean you're his cousin? Low doesn't have family, not outside pack. He grew up an orphan."

"I guess he's got family now," Brayton said with a shrug. Which reminded him that he really needed to call Pop soon. What the hell had Nelly been thinking, dumping some kid off only god knew where instead of handing him over to family to be properly raised? Pop and Mama would have loved a cute little nephew to harangue alongside him, and Brayton could have used him as a distraction while he snuck away from the haranguing.

The sound of movement from behind him drew his attention, and Brayton turned to regard a quiet, solemn-faced Low. Alpha he might be, and clearly mature for his age, but young was young and finding out he had a family after a lifetime alone was a doozy for anyone.

"Hey there, cuz," Brayton drawled. "You got an uppity pack here."

Low cracked a weak smile. "More fun that way."

"Guess I can't argue that," Brayton replied. "So what are we doing about the poor dead woman?"

Sally spoke up first. "I don't know what we can do, with it all five years old and the killer having gone to lengths even I can't overcome. No one knew what poor Joni was up to or where to find her on a good

day; there's no chance they'd remember anything five years later. Everyone thought she took off. Hell, even I was convinced she'd taken my advice and left."

"Your advice?" Peter asked, looking at her in surprise.

Sighing, Sally said, "She came to talk to me once. Let's face it—she was the town prostitute, as much as I tried to help her from resorting to such methods. She said she thought about leaving a lot, and I said though I hated to see anyone leave Midsummer, a fresh start might be just what she needed. It would give her a chance to be who and what she wanted instead of just living in the rut she'd made for herself here. I always hoped she'd come back someday if she chose to leave. When she vanished a few days later, I thought that's what she'd done." She sighed again and, for a moment, looked every bit of her impressive age. "I should have looked into the matter more closely."

Peter shook his head. "You couldn't have known, Sal. Leaving made perfect sense. I guess somebody didn't want her to go? Where is the body now?"

"My shed," Sally said.

"Well, bring it to me," Peter said, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Maybe there's something on her that will give us something to work with—the murderer can't be so perfect he left absolutely no trace behind."

Sally nodded and pulled a key from somewhere amongst her skirt of many colors, holding it out. At Low's nod, Connor and Antonio took the key and departed. Once the door closed behind them, Sally folded her arms across her chest and quirked a brow. "So, it would appear there is quite a bit going on here that is worth hearing in further detail. So how are you related to Low? Cousin you said?

"Yes," Brayton replied. "On my Pop's side." He slid his gaze to Low. "Nelly always was the pretty one. She's dead now, I'm sorry to say, but my folks will make you wonder if having blood—" His cell phone started ringing abruptly, playing a funeral dirge he'd recently downloaded, and Brayton groaned. "Speak of the devil, and she will call."

Pulling the phone out, he slid it open and slipped from the kitchen, saying "Hey, Mama. Working." He rolled his eyes and listened patiently while she droned on and on about everything on the planet. He rolled them again when she asked for the second time what he was doing. "I told you, Mama. I'm working. I've got a job helping a gremlin break a curse. What do you mean I sound funny? Like hell—"

Brayton winced and pulled the phone from his ear for a moment, then slowly brought it back. Why did he always forget just how mad she got when any sort of profanity was used? "Sorry, Mama. No, Mama, I'm always watching myself. Yes, ma'am. I apologize." He banged his head into the wall as she went on and on and on and on. When he could simply take no more of it, he waited for her to draw a breath, then hastily cut in. "Mama, I'm working. Go look at retirement home brochures. Yes, Mama, you know I do love you."

Brayton slid his phone shut and stuffed it back into his pocket, wondering morosely if anyone would be upset if he used the now empty clock tower for the bodies of his parents.

A soft, poorly muffled snicker made him whip around and narrow his eyes at Ferdy. "What are you laughing about, Itty-bitty?"

Ferdy smiled. "My aunt used to be the same way. She'd yell at my uncle for drinking like three beers a day, and he always told her they were the only reason he didn't beat her. But she was always the one who bought it for him each week, and he stopped when the doctors said he should, for her."

Brayton grinned. "Sounds like Pop and Mama, all right. So were you raised by your aunt and uncle?" he hazarded.

"Yeah," Ferdy said. "My parents died in a car wreck when I was two. They were going out on a date, and my aunt was babysitting for them."

"Aw, that's a shame. I'm sorry, baby."

Ferdy nodded. "Thanks. My aunt and uncle passed away a few years ago. Your folks sound nice. Both wolf, right? Because you're purebred?"

"That's right. My dad's true lone like me, and mama left her pack to be with him 'cause most packs don't like true lones. She always said he's all the pack she really needs."

"My uncle was human," Ferdy said. "He loved Aunt Helena; always joked that marrying a gremlin was like marrying a power tool come to life."

Brayton snorted. "Bet he got smacked for that."

"Every single time."

Brayton laughed then said, "So what are you doing out here, Itty-bitty?"

Ferdy shrugged. "I didn't want to accidentally touch a kitchen appliance, and I'm not really germane to the discussion. Meant just to get out of the way, but I got distracted by listening to you get yelled at."

"Yeah, yeah," Brayton groused, though he was pleased that Ferdy was actually harassing him. "Just wait until they show up to coo over their new nephew." And their new son-in-law, but Brayton wasn't mentioning that yet. "You'll be driven insane inside of an hour, I promise."

"They're coming here?" Ferdy asked. "That seems, uh, abrupt."

"Family is family," Brayton said with a shrug. "Plus, Mama is twice as curious as a cat and four times as liable to cause trouble satisfying it."

Ferdy smiled at that. "I see."

Brayton really wished he knew how to tell him that his parents were also coming because his mother was an evil, interfering psychopath who had somehow figured out 'the gremlin' was his mate, and he so totally did not believe a word of it when she claimed she'd heard it in the way his voice changed when he mentioned Ferdy.

There was never a good way to break the mate thing to any non-wolf. Even other paranormals had a hard time with the concept. He wasn't taking it so well himself, really, that certain parts of him were going 'oh, gremlin' while the rest was going 'the hell?'. So, yeah, he had no idea how to tell Ferdy 'Hey, don't really understand how or why yet, but we're mates, and by the way that's for life.'

Yeah—no.

Especially Ferdy, who was in the midst of putting up with a nasty curse and a nasty ex, and for all he obviously wouldn't mind a tumble in the sheets, Brayton seriously doubted he would be into the idea of a new relationship, and certainly not one that was permanent.

"Brayton?" Ferdy asked, looking at him in concern. "You seem out of it. Are you okay? You're not, uh, relapsing or something are you?"

Growling at that, Brayton moved, crowding into Ferdy's space, pushing him back against the bit of wall between the stairs and the doorway. "No, baby. Ain't nothing wrong with me that you can't fix."

"Wha—"

Brayton cut off the question with a kiss, and really, he swore that Ferdy tasted and smelled even better since he'd figured out Ferdy's was his—and maybe he was still freaking out about it, but he was starting to think he wouldn't ever be complaining.

"Mmph—" Ferdy said, trying to get words out, but he didn't seem to be trying too hard so Brayton didn't worry about it, just continued to kiss his Itty-bitty senseless.

He really couldn't wait until they were somewhere they could get naked. Preferably Ferdy's house, where he could wipe away the scents of past interloper and make his claim loud and clear. And now he could and would tear Kerry's throat out if he so much as caught a glimpse of the bastard anywhere near Ferdy or his home.

Growling at the thought, Brayton kissed harder, deeper, and reached out to grab Ferdy's ass, jerking them closer together, and it really *was* all the better for knowing why Ferdy was so damned addictive, even if he didn't get all the finer points of why he'd choose a gremlin.

He he jerked in surprise when Ferdy suddenly bit down hard on his bottom lip. "Ow! Something wrong, baby?"

"My name is not baby. Why do you keep kissing me?"

Brayton stifled a sigh. "Because I find I rather like doing it. You don't seem to mind."

Ferdy flushed, but shrugged and said, "Only a straight man or a dead man would refuse such an offer, but I'm way past done with games."

"I don't play games," Brayton said. "Life's too short for bullshit."

"So what are you playing at?"

Brayton smiled, slow and hot, in a way that had always worked very well for him. "Short term—my only game plan is finding out if you're a screamer. Long term—we'll discuss that later, baby."

"Stop calling me—"

"No," Brayton growled and kissed him again, pushing Ferdy back against the wall, pressing against him, so hard he could feel every little twist and wriggle. In revenge for earlier, he nipped Ferdy's bottom lip, but then he soothed it with his tongue. He rumbled and growled as he did his damndest to kiss Ferdy senseless.

Despite his plainly stated hesitations, Ferdy kissed back with equal heat and fervor; whatever Ferdy's misgivings, he was interested, and Brayton liked to think the interested was for more than just sex. Though they could certainly start with that.

"We—" Ferdy managed as Brayton slid his mouth down to nibble at Ferdy's throat. "We—we have a curse and-uh—a—uh—stop that!"

Brayton laughed, low and deep, but with a last nip drew back. "Okay, Itty-bitty. Finish your sentence."

"We've got work to do," Ferdy said after a moment.

"Yeah, I know," Brayton replied and dropped a brief kiss on Ferdy's nose before finally pushing away. "Let's go get rid of your curse and find that poor woman's killer." He grabbed Ferdy's hand and dragged him back to the kitchen. "So what'd we miss?" he asked, not letting go of Ferdy's hand despite Ferdy's none too subtle tugging.

"Peter went to go examine the body they brought here," Low said. "I sent Connor and Toni to go try and ask around, even if we don't think that will result in much of anything."

Brayton nodded. "I don't suppose she had any regular johns?"

"I don't know," Low said. "Peter might, since she came to see him? I can go ask."

"No rush. I'll find out from the yokels. First, though, I want food."

Ferdy rolled his eyes. "It's on the table."

Brayton gave the broth and bread a withering look. "That is not food." Ferdy scowled. Brayton smirked, and used his free hand to flick Ferdy's nose.

"Stop doing that."

"No. Let's go find me some real food, baby. Low, call if you do find out from Peter about her regular johns. I'll be in town. Got pen and paper?" He reluctantly let go of Ferdy's hand to jot down his phone number on the pad of paper Sally handed him then pulled out his own phone to punch in Low's number.

Scowling when he saw Ferdy had shoved his hands into his pockets, Brayton settled for grabbing Ferdy's arm and dragging him to the kitchen door.

"Oh, Brayton," Sally said, stopping him just as he was about to step out. "Welcome to Midsummer. I hope you'll like it here."

"Ma'am," Brayton drawled, touching his forehead in lieu of tipping a hat he wasn't wearing. Outside, he finally made himself let go of Ferdy. He really wanted a damned cigarette, but his pack had been nowhere among his things, so it would have to wait. Looking around, he realized he maybe should have done this inside. Eh. Like he'd never changed outdoors before? "Hey, Itty-bitty, need a favor."

"What?" Ferdy asked cautiously.

Brayton grinned and moved to where there was no way anyone on the road could see them. Then he started stripping. "Carry my stuff for me."

Ferdy made a series of noises then, all the while trying very hard not to look at him. Brayton laughed and chucked every last scrap of clothing at him. Then he shifted and gave Ferdy a playful growl and bark.

"I don't think I like you," Ferdy grouched as he folded the clothes and bundled them neatly together, before he gathered up the items which had been in Brayton's pockets.

That certainly wasn't true. With Kerry nowhere in sight, Ferdy was loosening up nicely. Already he was comfortable enough to say things like that, which he hadn't been just hours ago. Brayton barked again then led the way to the road and toward town.

Ferdy sighed, joining him, clothes in one arm and held against his chest. They'd probably smell like Ferdy when Brayton put them on again later. He growled his approval of this, but Ferdy sighed again, breaking into his wandering thoughts. "I really miss things like cars and bikes," he said. "I hope we find the killer soon."

Barking to indicate they would, damn it, Brayton rubbed up against Ferdy's legs, almost tripping him in the process.

"Watch it!"

Brayton only lolled his tongue in amusement and did it again.

"Wolves," Ferdy muttered. "Nothing but puppies."

That made Brayton growl. Just how many other wolves did Ferdy know? Just the pack? Or would he have to go start issuing threats somewhere?

Ferdy sighed again. "I really am sick of all this walking."

Brayton pushed at Ferdy's free hand, doing so until Ferdy finally caught on and kept it buried in Brayton's fur.

"You make no sense."

That wasn't true, even if it should be. Brayton made noises of protest and nipped playfully at Ferdy's leg in reprimand.

"Stop that!"

He did it again, just because he could. Ferdy rolled his eyes and tugged at Brayton's fur.

Maybe that was why he liked Ferdy against all reason. When he wasn't all knotted up, definite spunk showed through. He wondered why Ferdy had been willing to put up with a loser like Kerry when it was obvious he could have had so much better simply for the asking—assuming asking had been required.

But, he knew why. Ferdy himself had more or less admitted it—he got easily distracted by and lost in his work. Brayton had seen it dozens of times before with gremlins. Give them some broken bit of machinery or a mechanical puzzle, and they'd be absorbed for hours.

Brayton still held even a gremlin couldn't stay focused on machinery if someone walked up to him, grabbed his dick, and said 'let's do something else for a bit'.

He was, he realized, getting comfortable with the idea of Ferdy being his. Who knew?

They continued on in uneventful silence until they drew near Ferdy's house, which they had to pass on their way into town, and the wind shifted, bringing him the scent of Kerry.

Snarling, growling, Brayton jerked free of Ferdy and bolted off, racing toward the house, barking as he spotted Kerry in the yard.

Kerry at least had the decency to look like he was about to wet himself. He bolted for his car and scrambled into it. Brayton stopped halfway there, realizing that somewhere in his mad dash Kerry had dropped his car keys. Amused, he picked them up in his mouth then strode to the porch. Sitting back on his haunches, he dropped the keys in front of him and gave Kerry a look that said *I dare you*.

Trapped in his car and unable to go anywhere, Kerry swore loudly, colorfully, and for a very long time. Brayton chuffed in amusement and half-wished his mama was there. She'd beat the fool within an inch of his life for using such language.

Ferdy came running up a moment later. He groaned as he took everything in. "Kerry, I said go away and stay away. Why are you here?"

"Cause that damned fleabag has my keys," Kerry snapped. He then gave Ferdy a smile he probably thought was charming. "Anyway, I know you miss me. I told you, I'm willing to take you back so long as you're willing to make some changes."

"You want me to stop acting like a gremlin," Ferdy said quietly. "You want me to charge everyone lots of money they don't have and I don't need."

Kerry sneered. "You're too soft, Ferdy. That's the real reason most people can't stand you. All the spine of a jellyfish."

Brayton growled a warning at the bastard. He *really* wished Ferdy would bring his clothes because he didn't want to be forced to shift and beat the bastard to death naked. Getting into fights naked was as far from fun as it was possible to get. Twice was more times than he could stand; he didn't want there to be a third.

"I'm through discussing it, Kerry. You're the one who dumped me, so why do you keep coming back?"

"I feel sorry you got hit with that nasty curse, babe. But I also thought it might be waking you up a bit, getting you to see past your silly bits of machinery."

Brayton snarled and barked at that, truly livid now. They might be silly bits of machinery, lifeless pieces of metal to most of them, but to gremlins those same bits and pieces were all but alive. Anybody who cared about a gremlin would never show such contempt for something they needed like breathing.

He really wanted to make with the chomping, but that would end in more trouble than it was worth. So Brayton settled for snapping and snarling, jingling the keys, and just generally looking like a big, bad, wolf. Even Kerry wasn't going to fuck with him, not when one good bite could kill him or worse. Only humans changed into werewolves. Everyone else... bad things happened, and they all eventually ended in death.

"Just leave, Kerry," Ferdy said. "Just leave and stay gone, please."

"Aw, babe, you know how much I like when you say please."

Ferdy flinched.

Brayton let out a long series of deafening barks. No one was getting away with upsetting his mate that way. No one. Picking the keys up in his mouth, he walked over to Ferdy and dropped them at his feet. Free of that responsibility, he turned and launched himself at the car, landing on the hood, then climbing/jumping/something? up to the roof, leaning over and showing Kerry all his teeth.

"Call off your fucking dog!" Kerry bellowed at Ferdy. Who, of all things, was actually laughing. "Asshole! Call off the damned dog, you little bitch!" Ferdy just kept laughing.

Brayton continued to bark and snarl, more than a little pleased by Ferdy's reaction, harassing Kerry relentlessly until the dumbass finally had the sense to roll up his car windows. Barking one last time for good measure, Brayton then leapt neatly down and returned to Ferdy. He pushed himself up on his forelegs, paws on Ferdy's shoulders, and gave Ferdy a quick, sloppy lick before dropping down and backing away.

Ferdy sputtered and cursed and shot him a look that said revenge would be had.

They both jumped when a car abruptly started up—and before they could get themselves together, Kerry was gunning right toward them in his old Chevy. No. At Ferdy.

Ferdy dodged right and tripped halfway to the house, but he managed to catch himself by twisting last minute, stumbling out of Kerry's path—

—and right into Brayton's GTO.

Brayton didn't even know what to do, what to think, as he watched Ferdy's curse wreck his car. But even as his mind recoiled in horror, he was moving toward Ferdy, far more concerned about him.

Ferdy was in a heap on the ground, face buried in his hands, shoulders trembling.

Kerry had stopped just short of plowing into the house and climbed out of his car, looking smug and cocky and begging for a broken nose.

Snarling, Brayton charged toward him, shifting as he drew close and obliging. He felt nothing but satisfaction as Kerry's nose shattered beneath his fist. Then he grabbed the howling bastard and stuffed him back into his car. Yanking off Kerry's belt, he used it to attach Kerry to his steering wheel.

That done, he went to find his clothes.

Once he was decent, he turned—and god, it made him want to scream and hit something and cry like a girl to see his honey as nothing but a pile of junk.

But his baby was hurt a lot more than his car, and Brayton couldn't bear that. He closed the space between them and dropped to his knees, pulling Ferdy into a tight embrace. Ferdy was trembling—shaking, really—and clearly reduced to tears. He was also muttering, but it took Brayton a moment to figure out he was spouting a litany of 'I'm sorry.'

"Hush, baby," Brayton said. "It's okay."

"But—" Ferdy looked up. "You—that car—"

Brayton dropped a brief kiss on his mouth. "Baby, it's just a car. You can fix it once we break your curse, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then no worries."

None at all, so long as he did not look at his honey, or even think about her. Poor honey. Poor baby. He was going to smash someone's face in for wrecking his car and upsetting his mate.

Except he'd already shattered Kerry's nose. Brayton smirked at the memory, not even caring a little bit that his hand hurt. He wondered if he could get away with breaking other parts of Kerry's face. Body. He wasn't picky; any sort of breaking would suffice.

"Come one, baby," Brayton said and dragged them both to their feet. "Get inside. I'm going to call Low about this mess, and finish dealing with him then we'll continue into town."

When Ferdy tried to protest, Brayton kissed him—and kept doing it until Ferdy finally gave up and went inside. Brayton then pulled out his phone and dialed Low's number. "Low, Brayton. Had a minor incident here at Ferdy's—I just broke Kerry's nose. Yeah." He quickly explained all that had happened, then listened to what Low said and finally hung up.

Shoving his phone away, he strode to where Kerry was still bitching and moaning while he made a half-assed effort to escape.

"Hey, there, sweetheart," Brayton said cheerfully, bracing one arm on the roof of the car and bending down to look at Kerry. "You'll be staying there for a bit. Sure hope you don't need to take a piss, though you already smell like shit so I don't suppose it would make much difference."

"Fuck you," Kerry said—or, at least, that was what it sounded like, as garbled as it was.

Brayton just laughed. "You'd be a lousy lay, and I don't fuck douche bags anyways. But if you come near Ferdy again, goblin, I'll kill you."

He could see from the genuine fear that flashed in Kerry's eyes for a moment that it had actually gotten through his thick head that Brayton's words were no idle threat. In the next moment, however, Kerry had forgotten all about being scared and threatened with death. "What the fuck does it matter to you what I do to that gremlin?"

Brayton shifted, leaning into the car and as close to Kerry as he could stand to be, pleased when Kerry tried to recoil. He bared his teeth and said, "The gremlin is mine. You mess with him, you mess with me, and even a dumbass like you should know what that means."

Kerry said nothing, but Brayton could see he'd gotten the message.

Hopefully he'd remember it. Brayton didn't actually enjoy killing people, even if Kerry wouldn't be any loss to the world.

Double-checking Kerry was secure, he locked the door, popped the hood then slammed the door shut. A few minutes of tinkering later, Brayton slammed the hood down, content that Kerry would be going nowhere even if he could get the fucker hotwired again. Smirking at Kerry just to piss him off, Brayton turned and finally went inside.

He found Ferdy in his workroom, nose buried in books, manuals, and hand-written notes. All of it pertained to the Pontiac '67 GTO.

"Baby—"

Ferdy jumped, dropping the book he was currently reading, and looked up. He looked so stricken, Brayton really didn't know what to say or do. "I really am sorry," Ferdy said. "This stupid curse—and stupid Kerry—I—I'll fix it. I swear."

Brayton moved across the room and sat down beside him, shoving all the books and papers out of the way, and pulled Ferdy into his lap, bundling him close. "Baby, stop worrying about the car. I know you can fix it. I told you—there ain't nothing wrong with me that you can't fix."

"That doesn't make any sense," Ferdy protested. "It's almost midnight. You haven't been here twelve hours, and five of them you were unconscious."

"And you stayed by my side," Brayton said. "Doesn't that seem a little strange to you?"

"I felt bad," Ferdy said quietly, talking mostly to Brayton's chest. "Carl made you come help me, and then you had to put up with Kerry, then the wolfsbane—"

Brayton kissed him, quick and sharp. "Now I know you're way nicer than anyone deserves, Itty-bitty, but I doubt you're *that* nice to everyone in town. That means it makes even less sense to fuss so much over a total stranger, and one who keeps calling you names." He winked.

"I don't know," Ferdy said, voice still soft. "You're—different, somehow."

Brayton made a laughing, rumbling sound, nuzzling the side of Ferdy's neck. "Yeah, different works. You're certainly not what I expected, but my nose is never wrong."

Ferdy frowned. "Your nose?"

"Yeah," Brayton replied and kissed Ferdy's nose.

"I don't follow," Ferdy said. "What does your nose say about me?"

"That you're mine," Brayton said, voice low, serious. "Mine through and through."

Ferdy's eyes snapped wide as the meaning of his words clicked into place. "That—that's not possible."

Brayton grinned, suddenly very pleased with life, even if it was going to be very difficult for the foreseeable future. Cause Ferdy hadn't said no way, and he wasn't moving off Brayton's lap. In a long history of non-wolves being told they were a wolf's mate, Ferdy's reaction was practically acceptance.

"You don't even like me," Ferdy continued.

"I agree I never thought you'd be my type," Brayton said, "but I'm also willing to admit I was wrong. If I really didn't like you, baby, I wouldn't keep kissing you and wishing to do a whole lot more." Ferdy looked doubtful, which Brayton supposed was fair enough. "I'm not Kerry."

"I know," Ferdy said, and a brief, bitter laugh escaped. "Believe me, I'm well aware you're not him."

Brayton smiled briefly. "I guess I can work with that, then. Now's not the time to work all this out, though. We need to hunt a killer down, hmm?" He grimaced. "At some point I really would like some food."

"You have to fix it if you want to eat here and want to risk throwing up."

Grimacing, Brayton replied, "We don't want me cooking. Guess we'll just keep waiting 'til we reach town, though at this hour..."

"You'll be more in luck than you might think," Ferdy said, as Brayton got them both on their feet. "This is Midsummer. It's more nocturnal than not; even the humans flip to a night schedule."

"Weirdest town I ever saw; can't believe I've never heard of it."

Ferdy shrugged. "I hadn't either 'til I drifted through one day. Never left, obviously. I half-think Sally ensures it's kept off the maps, publicity wise."

Brayton snorted at the mention of Sally. "That woman is the strangest vamp I've ever met. I bet her hunter thinks she's hilarious."

"Umm—I think she married a hunter? He's still human, though. I fixed his truck a couple of weeks ago and their lawnmower sometime last month."

"Why am I not surprised?" Brayton asked, rolling his eyes. "Let's go." Ferdy nodded and followed him through the house. Brayton grinned as they reached the front hall. "You'll have to carry my clothes and stuff again." In reply, Ferdy rolled his eyes and abruptly turned, rifling through the hall closet a moment before withdrawing with a soft 'aha!' and holding up a black book bag.

"Good idea," Brayton said and tweaked his nose, snickering when Ferdy scowled.

Before Ferdy could voice his protests, however, Brayton began to strip. It was something he did so often, even more often than people did anyway, such a normal part of being wolf, that he didn't think about it even when he had a bed partner.

But he rather liked feeling Ferdy's eyes on him as he stripped piece by piece, the way the scent of lust spiked, and he was very sore and disappointed he could do nothing about it at present.

Shifting, he then barked for Ferdy to open the door. Free of the house, he charged outside and sprinted for the car where Kerry was still trapped. Scrambling onto the roof, he barked and barked, making Kerry jump and flinch.

Then he leapt down and rejoined Ferdy, and they continued their walk into town.

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The first place they stopped was a small diner that was so small town Brayton wanted to start putting together a checklist just to see if the town actually met all the cliché requirements. Their waitress was a perky little thing who immediately started to drive him crazy. Was all that bouncing the result of too many drugs or too much sugar? He could never tell the difference.

"What would you like?" she finally asked, almost seeming like she was out of breath.

"Usual for me," Ferdy said.

"Burger and fries. Medium. Water to drink. Thanks, darlin'." When she was gone, Brayton asked, "So what's the usual?"

"Uh—chili. Bill, the cook, makes it extra spicy for me."

"You like spicy food?"

Ferdy nodded. "Yeah. My uncle, he traveled a lot before he met my aunt. Um, like you, I guess, but he traveled into Asia and all a lot. He became really fond of the spicy food overseas. He liked Mexican and Cajun, too. All of it, really. At our house, even breakfast was often spicy."

"Cajun, huh? Mama will have to make you her gumbo, then. She learned it from a woman who joined her pack years before mama left it to be with pop."

"Sounds good," Ferdy said with a smile.

"She'll be pleased as anything to hear it. Pop and I can't eat it without crying like babies."

Ferdy burst out laughing. "You don't like spicy?"

"Not as such," Brayton replied. "A plate of wings here and there will do me just fine." He grinned when Ferdy laughed again and fought an urge to kiss him. He suspected no one would give a damn, this being Crazy Land, but no need to create a spectacle. Instead he shifted gears, back to the matter at hand. "So did you know her at all, baby?"

"Joni, you mean? Not really. She had this old Ford clunker I fixed a couple of times, and she always wanted to pay, uh, in services? But it was only those couple of times, and I was swamped with work, so I didn't pay much attention past assuring her she didn't have to pay anything, in any way."

Brayton frowned. "Seems like she was good at flying under the radar."

All too often, though, such people did. People didn't notice the dregs of society much, not until they did something that didn't mesh with that lowest-rung lifestyle. It was nothing people meant to do, exactly; it was just the way it played.

"Whatever happened to that old clunker, I wonder," Brayton asked aloud.

"Dunno," Ferdy replied. "If it had been left abandoned somewhere, it would have been brought to me, but I guess we all naturally assumed she drove it out of town."

"She didn't though," Brayton mused, drumming his fingers on the tabletop. "Five years later, I doubt much of it's left, but it must be somewhere."

"Do you think we could find it?" Ferdy asked doubtfully.

Brayton sighed. "No. Sure would be nice, though, to see it sitting pretty as you please in the killer's yard."

Ferdy looked at him in amusement, which pleased Brayton far too much. He liked Ferdy loose and easy. He could not wait to see what he was like after being thoroughly fucked.

Seeming to sense something of his thoughts, Ferdy flushed and looked down at the scuffed table top. Brayton kicked his leg lightly, causing Ferdy to glance up again. "So, baby," he drawled, "I never did get a good look at your bedroom—"

"Food's up!" their waitress said abruptly, depositing their plates and drinks in a flurry of clatters and snapping gum and bouncing. "Anything else you need?"

"No," Brayton said. "We're perfect, thanks, hon."

By the time she finally left, the mood was gone. Brayton bit into his burger, sulking.

Ferdy smiled fleetingly, looking at Brayton briefly before focusing on his chili. The way he ate it, Brayton had a hard time believing it was spicy—except Mama ate her spicy food the same way, and he'd learned the hard way that meant it was hotter than any sane person should want his food.

He was more than content with his own burger and fries, which were the best he'd had in a long time.

"So where are we going next?" Ferdy asked.

Brayton finished chewing a couple of fries then said, "That wolfsbane wasn't dime store quality. It was high grade stuff; the sort of potency favored by witches, alchemists, hunters—that ilk. It also was relatively fresh. Bane is like any other herb; over time it begins to lose its potency. Whoever set those traps is also maintaining them; he didn't just set them and walk away. That bane was set or reset very recently, within the past few days I'd say. So, we need to find who sells it—they can and will tell us whose been buying it."

"Hmm," Ferdy said, head dipping as he thought, still holding the spoon that was, in turn, still in his mouth. After a moment, he pulled the spoon out and set it back in his mostly empty bowl. "Mr. Lester owns the drugstore; he sells that sort of thing. But, uh, Old Lady West grows most of the herbs and all that he uses to stock his shelves. Maybe all of them. She'd have the better stuff, right? Cause I don't think he sells anything too strong, in case kids get hold of it."

"That sound 'bout right. Where does this Old Lady West live?"

"Uh—east side of town. I think she moved to Sycamore Street last spring. I fixed her stove when it broke after she moved in."

"Guess we'd better head that way then," Brayton said, frowning at his empty plate, wondering if there was any way to justify staying for dessert.

Ferdy laughed. "Umm. The pies here are really, really good."

Brayton smiled sheepishly. "How'd you guess?"

"I've never met a wolf who wasn't perpetually hungry."

Brayton narrowed his eyes. "Just how many wolves have you known? And how many in the biblical sense?"

Ferdy choked on his soda and started coughing. "What—" He glared. "None of your business! I'm a gremlin. People ask me to repair things everywhere I go. After my aunt and uncle died, I traveled for a few years. One bad winter, I shacked up with a pack and did repair work for room and board."

"Oh?" Brayton said, a hint of growl in the word.

"I—so I got along with one. For a little while. But he found me annoying too, in the end," Ferdy replied, voice growing smaller and smaller as he spoke. He asked tightly, "Does it really matter?"

Brayton immediately felt contrite. "No, baby. I'm just being possessive."

Ferdy looked at him, hurt. "I'm not the kind to cheat or anything."

"Trust me, Itty-bitty, I know that. Got nothing do with it. I didn't say I didn't trust you. I said I'm possessive. Let's say you went home one day and saw someone had messed with your tools. They were all there, all fine. Nothing to be alarmed about at all; whoever had used them had taken care of them and everything. No reason to be upset. Would you be upset anyway?"

For a moment, Ferdy actually looked angry. Then he seemed abruptly to realize what he was doing and promptly flushed. "Uh---but those are tools. I'm, uh—"

"A million times more important and *mine*," Brayton said. "No one is allowed to touch you but me."

Too much, too soon, too fast, his brain screamed at him. Ferdy was already skittish—he'd run screaming into the night if Brayton kept shoving the mate thing at him.

But, to his everlasting shock, Ferdy only buried the faintest of sweet little smiles in his glass of soda.

The waitress returned then, once again with the worst timing on earth, and asked if they'd like desert. "I hear the place had good pie," Brayton said.

She beamed. "Today we've got apple, sweet potato, and shoe-fly."

"Sweet potato. Thanks, honey."

"Sure. Anything for you, Ferdy?"

"Apple."

Brayton smiled until she was gone, then looked at Ferdy, who had a bit of a pout going suddenly. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Stop calling me that," Ferdy said.

"No."

"Do you ever call anyone by their names?" Ferdy asked. "Or do you always call everyone honey and darling and baby and stuff?"

Brayton stared at him, startled—then realization dawned, and he gave Ferdy a slow grin. "Southern thing, Itty-bitty. My neighbor called me 'baby duck' all my life. But you're the only one I call baby."

Ferdy scowled at his soda. "It's still not my name."

Brayton just kept grinning, pleased as punch, until Effervescent Barbie brought their pie. "Thanks," he said, pointedly leaving off the 'darling' he'd have otherwise tacked on.

She smiled then bounced off to torture another table. Ferdy made a face at him, but he was smiling faintly as he demolished his apple pie and ice cream.

Maybe, Brayton thought, just maybe he wasn't moving too fast at all.

He was still smiling when they paid up and left a few minutes later. On impulse, he grabbed Ferdy's hand and held fast, only continuing to smile when Ferdy looked at him in surprise. "So where's Sycamore?"

"Uh—um—this way," Ferdy said and led the way through the small town, cheeks flushed most of the way to what proved to be a tidy little two story brick house on a street so postcard perfect Brayton rolled his eyes.

"Was this town built according to some Guide to Building the Perfect Quaint and Picturesque Small Town?" Brayton demanded. "If it gets any sweeter, my teeth will rot."

Ferdy coughed in a poor attempt at smothering his laughter. "I thought the same thing when I got here. I kept waiting for the punch line. But it, uh, really is like that here. Sally takes her territory seriously."

"I so cannot wait to meet the plucky town sheriff," Brayton muttered. "If his last name is Taylor and his deputy is Barney, I'm going to lose it, though."

"Uh—" Ferdy looked hopelessly lost by that comment. "His name is Kirby, actually. He's from the west coast. He's a witch."

"Well, that's a relief," Brayton said, then fell silent as they reached the door.

He lifted a hand to knock, reluctantly letting go of Ferdy's hand with a last squeeze. When the door opened, he was not at all surprised to see an old woman who smelled like roses and looked like she baked cookies every week for the kids at Sunday school.

"Hullo, Ferdy," the woman said, looking surprised. "Been talking lots about you at bingo. Heard tell you tossed that loser out on his ear. 'Bout time. And what have we here?" She lifted a pair of glasses from where they hung from a chain around her neck. "My, my, what a strapping fellow. He yours, Ferdy? You're a wolf, boy, or I'm not a day over eighty."

Brayton smiled. "Yes, ma'am. I'm a wolf. I heard tell you're an expert on herbs, and I came to ask about wolfsbane."

"I see," she said and unlocked her screen door. "Come on in, then, boys. I just made some coffee, though my doctor keeps telling me to stop drinking it. Bah! Doctors and priest, they think anything fun is bad for you."

Brayton's smile widened into a grin. "Truer words were never spoken. Mama always said never trust a man who tells you to have no fun, nor a man who tells you to have nothing but fun."

"Your mama sounds smart," West replied.

"Smart as the sun is bright and three times as likely to burn me to a crisp," Brayton replied.

West cackled, but the warm grin Ferdy gave him was far more pleasing.

"Sit, sit," West ordered, motioning them to her kitchen table as she worked on the coffee and brought it all to the table with cream and sugar, other odds and ends. "My garden and work room are out back, if you need to see them. I do grow wolfsbane, of course, but the Sheriff knows I don't get up to any tomfoolery with that or any of my other plants. I'm very strict about who buys it, and few of them get it at its highest potency. But my wolfsbane was stolen two days ago—and this ain't the first time it's happened. Over the past year, I've had six different herbs stolen on a monthly basis. Me and the Sheriff, we've tried everything, but whoever the thief is, he's slippery."

"And you haven't uncovered any clues as to who the culprit might be?" Brayton asked. That sounded as slippery and slimy as their clock tower killer. He snorted at that, just picturing the headline: Clock Tower Killer Strikes, Funeral Bells Ring.

Hopefully they'd come up with one a bit more heartening, involving the killer being captured or killed. But it bothered him the killer could mask his scent, repeatedly steal herbs from the same woman—and he had no proof of that, but from the nature of the herbs, and the frequency with which the curses and other traps would have had to be renewed, it seemed probable. The bastard was crafty as a goblin, as the saying...

As the saying went.

Surely not.

He turned to Ferdy. "Baby, when did you say Kerry and you got together?"

"What—uh—" He fumbled at the serious expression on Brayton's face. "About a year ago."

"Before or after you started working on the clock tower?"

"Um—I don't really—no wait!" Ferdy looked pleased with himself. "I was only at the bar that night 'cause I'd promised to fix the freezer, and my hands ached from disassembling the clock work all day. Kerry—uh—offered me a ride home, when he saw how tired I was." He smiled bitterly.

Brayton growled and brushed his knuckles along Ferdy's cheek, but kept his mind on business. "Ma'am, you said all this thieving started a year ago?"

"Yes."

"The clock tower repairs started roughly a year ago—specifically repairs on the clock itself. That's too close to the body for the killer to be comfortable. So he booby-trapped the place, kept the traps maintained, since moving it at that point would have been impossible."

"You think Kerry killed her?" Ferdy asked. "But why?"

"It's only a theory and one with all the stability of a frozen lake in April," Brayton replied. "It could crack at any moment."

"Crafty as a goblin," West said, mouth set in a grim line. "That boy Kerry is wily as a fox, more so than most people think. If he wasn't, he wouldn't still be alive."

Brayton worried his bottom lip as his mind raced. "But that would only explain the herbs he used in the booby traps. It doesn't explain the curse. An open curse is much more difficult to cast than a closed one. Few witches who do such things for a price would be willing to cast so difficult an open curse."

"Maybe he cast it himself," West said.

"Goblins don't do magic," Brayton said, shaking his head.

West looked at him in gentle, amused reprimand. "They do if they're hobgoblins."

Brayton went still at that, frowning deeply. "A hobgoblin." He pondered that.

"But—if Kerry was a hobgoblin—" Ferdy shook his head. "He'd love that. I don't see why he'd keep it a secret. Hobgoblins are rare; only one goblin in thousands is born with the ability to do magic. If Kerry was a hobgoblin, he'd brag about it."

Even before Ferdy had finished speaking, Brayton was shaking his head. "Not if it better suited his purposes to hide it. I could be shooting in the dark, but I think maybe our friend Kerry isn't quite as stupid an ass as we've been led to think—assuming all this supposition is correct."

"But—" Ferdy fell silent and shook his head at Brayton's nudging. "Nothing."

Though he wanted to push, Brayton let it slide for the moment. "Hate to run, ma'am, but I think we'd best get going. Thank you for the help and the wonderful coffee."

West nodded. "Of course, boys. But you come back any time, I'll make you my gingersnaps."

"Then I'll see you again for a certain, ma'am," Brayton said again, nodding.

She smiled at him and patted his arm. "You're much better for our Ferdy."

"Ma'am," Brayton drawled one last time, then got them outside and on their way again. "So what were you going to say in there, baby?"

Ferdy shrugged, looking miserable. "If Kerry did it—why all the—why did he pretend to—"

Brayton dropped an arm over his shoulders, pulling Ferdy tight against his side. "You're well-liked. If I'm right about him, he probably thought it would be wiser to shack up with you, keep you distracted, until he could move the body."

Ferdy laughed, sounding positively wretched. "So he pretended to be interested in me in hopes having him around would be more interesting than repairing the clock tower. I'm a sucker."

Brayton snarled at that, stopping and snatching Ferdy close, kissing him until Ferdy went pliant and loose in his arms, all the unhappy tension melting away. "You're not a sucker, baby," Brayton rumbled. "Whatever you might be, you're mine now. The rest doesn't matter."

Ferdy just shivered—then pushed up and kissed him again, a desperate sort of edge to it. Brayton growled in surprise, but went along gladly.

"Better, Itty-bitty?" he asked when they eventually broke apart.

"Yeah," Ferdy said. "Do you really think Kerry is behind this?"

"I do like the sound of it, but I admit I'm biased. It would explain why he wants you back so bad."

Ferdy's brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"He's probably trying to get close to you to break that curse so I'll go away again. Except now he knows that I won't be leaving so easily." Damn it. He really hoped they were wrong, and that they weren't dealing with a hobgoblin. If they were, and that hobgoblin was desperate to prevent their learning he was the killer...

He could have just left the body and wiped away all traces. A hobgoblin could do that if given sufficient reason to go to that much trouble. So why set so many booby traps to hide the body of the village whore?

It didn't really make sense. If he'd left well enough alone, the body would have been discovered, but the mystery likely never solved. Booby traps just pissed people off and drew their attention.

Then again, if Carl hadn't been around to witness Ferdy's curse, no one would have called Brayton. Who knew what would have happened, then. Without a gremlin to repair it, the repairs would have come to a grinding halt until they found someone else who could do the work. That would have left Kerry plenty of time to finally move and destroy the body.

Why did Kerry even give a damn, he wondered abruptly. If Kerry was the killer, wouldn't it be just as easy for him to pick up and leave? No doubt he was loathe to leave the comfort and familiarity of Midsummer, but better to go than stay and be tried for murder.

"We definitely need to speak with Kerry again," Brayton said, giving up for the moment. He wasn't going to figure out anything yet; there simply wasn't enough information to work with. "As quick as we can."

They did move quickly, though it was tricky matching his much longer strides to Ferdy's shorter ones. That was nothing they wouldn't fix over time, though.

His phone began ringing as they drew close to the edge of the city proper. Brayton wondered absently if they had one of those signs somewhere stating the population, and if it read something like 'Welcome to Midsummer, Population 500 Abnormals, 800 Humans'.

Rolling his eyes at himself, he glanced at the caller ID and then slid it open. "Yeah, Low?" He listened as Low recounted what they had learned from Peter's examination of the corpse, unable to believe what he was hearing.

Low hung up a couple of minutes later, and Brayton slid the phone shut and stuffed it back in his pocket. "So Joni was pregnant, and Peter was able to determine it had a goblin father. How many goblins live in Midsummer?"

Ferdy frowned in thought. "Only three, I think. Kerry, then Jessica, she's got a sweet Harley I take care of regularly. There's also Grizzle, but he's pushing fifty and lives forty minutes south on his farm. I head out there to fix his farm equipment when he needs it."

"Looks like Kerry may be our culprit after all." He worried his bottom lip in thought. "Though, if he's got magic, he's probably long gone. I hope the others can get to him before he manages to get out of town."

"Uh—I don't—I don't think he'll leave town."

"No?" Brayton asked, surprised. "That'd be the smart thing to do."

Ferdy shrugged. "I dunno. He was always funny about it. I remember I had to go out of town a couple of times to do some favors. I had to fix a tractor the one time, and the other time I had to see if I could get this old Dodge to run. But, both times, Kerry was pissed with me for leaving instead of spending time with him. I suggested he come along, and we could make a weekend of it, have a mini-vacation.

"Another time, I wound up needing some tools I hadn't brought. I asked him to bring them to me, but he wouldn't, no matter how I asked him. Finally had to get someone else to do it. I realized later he wouldn't do it because it would have meant leaving town since I was well outside the city limits of Midsummer."

"That is the strangest thing I've heard in a long time. Well, no—strangest thing I've heard tonight. This whole town is still weirder."

Ferdy laughed. "You haven't encountered stranger towns than Midsummer?"

"They're all creepy the way small towns should be creepy. Not all happy cheerful content creepy," Brayton replied.

"Ah," Ferdy said, not looking quite as amused as Brayton had intended. "Where do you live?"

"Anywhere and everywhere, really," Brayton said. "But when I need a break, I've got a nice little cabin me and Pop fixed up nice and tight. Not even a blizzard can manage to get so much as a snowflake inside." He beamed.

"It sounds nice," Ferdy said quietly.

"It is. Nice little place when I need a vacation. Do you like snow, baby?"

Ferdy frowned. "When I'm warm and dry inside and admiring it through the window. Snow is cold."

Brayton laughed. "Yeah, baby, snow is cold. I keep forgetting you no-meat-on-the-bones types can't stand low temperatures."

"It's not my fault my metabolism is crazy."

Brayton snorted at that. Metabolism his ass. He was unable to press the point, however, as Ferdy's house came into view. And now that he was paying attention to more than the wonderful scent of Ferdy, he could tell in a sniff that Kerry had been gone a while.

The bastard had probably left the moment they were out of sight.

He could smell Low, however—and someone new.

As they reached Ferdy's house, he saw a police cruiser tucked off to the side of the house, out of immediate sight. Next to Low stood a tall, handsome figure dressed in the brown uniform of a Sheriff. He had short, curly, brown-gold hair and deeply tanned skin, and a face that would be pretty if it weren't set in such serious lines. His eyes were a pale, yellow-ish green, with the odd glint to them that always said *witch* to Brayton.

Humans did not typically have magic. Most humans who 'performed' magic were simply alchemists who manipulated natural components to manage things they could not otherwise do. Any human who *did* possess magic, like a witch, probably had a paranormal somewhere in the family tree.

The witch Sheriff smelled like cinnamon and yellow roses, an odd scent. Brayton sneezed. "You must be the Sheriff," he greeted when he got his sneezing under control.

The Sheriff tipped his hat and said, "Kirby Hindon. You're the lone I've been hearing about all damn night, and what is it now, almost three in the damned morning? Low called me, and I said I'd meet him here. Hey, Ferdy."

"Hey," Ferdy greeted with a smile. "How's the furnace?"

"Keeping my house nice and toasty, thanks again. I swear, you keeping fix shit, and eventually you'll fix it all, and there'll be nothing left."

Ferdy laughed. "There's always something to fix, especially when Mrs. Holly wants the latest gossip."

Kirby flicked his gaze toward Brayton, mouth curving in amusement. Honestly, Brayton would be jealous and possessive of the easy camaraderie they seemed to share, but Ferdy was not even slightly interested in the Sheriff and vice versa. Turning back to Ferdy, Kirby said, "I'm sure she'll be up your way tomorrow—if not sooner—with a broken music box. Seems there's lots to know at your house right now, Ferdy."

"Broken because she keeps throwing them on the floor or going at them with hammers," Ferdy grouched. "I wish she'd stop; they were antiques before she broke them fifty times."

Laughing, Kirby clapped Ferdy on the shoulder. "Chin up." He sobered in the next moment. "So Low called and told me about Kerry probably killing Joni. Poor kid. I went to school with her brother; she was only five years behind us. If he'd lived..." Kirby shook his head. "But wishing something were true never got anyone anywhere. I guess we'd best find the wily goblin."

Brayton grimaced. "Won't be easy. If I'm right, we aren't dealing with a goblin—we're dealing with a hobgoblin."

"What?" Kirby demanded, voice cracking out. "That—are you certain?"

"No," Brayton said. "It's only a theory, but..." He quickly explained all that they had discussed at Old Lady West's house and since leaving it.

Kirby made a face when he finished. "Son of a bitch." He touched the radio fastened to his shoulder, barking out codes and names, ordering all his men to keep eye sharp for Kerry, suspected murderer and hobgoblin.

A response came almost immediately. "Suspect seen headed south, Sheriff. Looks like he's headed toward that fishing hole of his, off May Apple Road."

"Roger that."

"Want us to go after him?"

"Negative. I'll handle it. Stay clear, understand me?"

"Affirmative, Sheriff."

The radio fell silent. Kirby turned to Low. "Do you know May Apple?"

"Yeah," Low replied. "We'll meet you there."

Kirby nodded, then turned to Ferdy—

"I'll stay," Ferdy said before he could speak. "I'd just be in the way at this point."

"I wish the rest of the town would show as much sense and willingness to cooperate as you," Kirby said. He clapped Ferdy on the shoulder again, nodded to Low and Brayton, then turned and strode to his car, driving off with a last wave.

"We can cut through the woods," Low said and immediately began to strip.

Brayton tugged Ferdy close for a quick, hard kiss, then followed suit.

Shifted, Low threw his head back and howled, signaling to the rest of the pack. Then he barked at Brayton, before turning and racing off into the woods.

Brayton rubbed against Ferdy in farewell then bolted after Low. They ran through the dark forest at break neck speeds, Brayton close to Low, trusting him to know where they were going, what to look out for.

Several minutes later they burst into a clearing, an unusual tang in the air—the smell, Brayton realized, of hobgoblin. Whatever Kerry had smelled like before had clearly just been what he used to mask his real scent. *This* scent was rank with magic, with herbs and spices, with the forest all around them, and a hint of smoke.

Kerry also looked different—harder, rougher, his nose was already healed. That lazy air he'd carried was gone; he had a harder, meaner edge to him. He wore black jeans and a black tank top and seemed oblivious to the cold though it must be in the lower forties by this point.

"Wolves," Kerry said in disgust. "I've had my fill of goddamn wolves. If not for a wolf, I wouldn't be stuck here, and if not for you, lone, I wouldn't be in this mess. Come on then, assholes. I'll take as many with you as I possibly can!"

He threw a hand out, casting what Brayton realized only then was wolfsbane—

But then the scent of cinnamon and yellow roses sprang up, and the wolfsbane fell like lead to the ground, its deadly scent going out like a candle thrown in water.

Kerry swore. "Kirby. I should have known one annoyance would summon the other."

"Kerry," Kirby said, stepping from the shadows. His gun was still holstered at his hip; instead of his weapon, he held an amulet in his hand, the silver chain tangled around his fingers—a pentacle twined with roses. Humans with magical ability often found it easier to use with an object of magic to draw and focus the power correctly; something which their bodies could not always do naturally without difficulty. Power adapters, some jokingly called such amulets and talismans. "What's all this damned nonsense? Why did you kill Joni?"

"Accident," Kerry said tersely. "We got into a fight, and it got out of hand."

Kirby shook his head. "If it was an accident, you should have come to me, and we might have straightened shit out."

"You wouldn't have believed me," Kerry snapped.

"I'm not sure I believe you now," Kirby conceded with a nod.

Kerry grimaced. "Anyway, *he* wouldn't have believed me, and that's way more important than you."

Brayton growled and barked. He? He who?

"Come along now, Kerry," Kirby said. "I don't want to turn this into a nasty little scuffle. I don't care if you are hobgoblin—you won't best me in magic." Kerry sneered. "Where are you going to go, Kerry? Do you really want to do this?" Kirby continued. "Just come along, we'll figure shit out."

"Fuck you," Kerry snapped. "I'm not going anywhere, but out of this fucking town, and I can't finish doing that if I 'just come along.' I don't want to make a fight of this either, but I'll do it if you don't leave me the hell alone."

Low growled and crept closer, hackles up.

"Back off, mutt, I'll—"

Kerry screamed in surprise as he was struck hard from behind and pinned to the ground by two large wolves. There was a flurry of screaming and shouting, snarling and biting, magic and teeth—

But then everything went still, and Kirby was hauling a handcuffed Kerry to his feet with a hand on the back of his neck, muttering something that was probably a spell to keep Kerry's magic under wraps.

Brayton barked and wondered what would happen next, even as he joined the other wolves in forming a small pack as they followed Kerry and Kirby to the cruiser.

"So what happened, Kerry? Why did the fight end the way it did?"

"Fuck if I know," Kerry said bitterly. "She told me she wanted to talk to me. We met in the clock tower like always. She said she was leaving, wanted me to go with her. Now she and I could have a good time here and there, but I couldn't leave. Don't know why she took the fool notion into her head. I tried to tell her what I wanted didn't matter—I can't leave."

Brayton barked.

"None of your fucking business," Kerry snapped.

"She didn't like hearing that, I take it?" Kirby pressed.

"She went fucking crazy. Everything went crazy. Then suddenly she was at the bottom of the stairs with her neck broken."

Silence fell as Kirby stuffed him into the back of the cruiser. Then Kirby leaned down and said, "She was pregnant, Kerry; did she get a chance to tell you that? With your kid."

Kerry jerked and stared wide-eyed, his face going a sickly gray-green. "What?"

Kirby slammed the door shut and moved around the car to the driver's side. Brayton growled and barked at him. Quirking a brow, Kirby said, "Why do I sense this is about Ferdy?" He rolled his eyes when Brayton chuffed at him. "Fine, but it's on you if Kerry pulls something or escapes."

Ignoring him, Brayton barked again and turned away towards the woods, the other wolves falling in around him, Low moving to take the lead as they ran back to Ferdy's house.

When they got there, Brayton saw an unfamiliar car, but the scent on the air and Low's happy reaction immediately identified the owner. Ferdy and Peter were inside, sitting in the living room drinking coffee. Brayton chuffed at Ferdy and whined in demand, pushing at Ferdy for attention.

Laughing, Ferdy shyly pet his head and said, "Uh—if you're looking for your clothes, I put them in my room."

Growling his approval of this, Brayton playfully nipped Ferdy's hand—then put his front paws on Ferdy's lap, leaned up and licked his face, then hopped down and scurried off while Ferdy was still sputtering. He padded up the stairs and into Ferdy's bedroom, loving the way the space was saturated in Ferdy's scent. Only the barest hints of Kerry remained, and they were fading quickly.

Shifting, he picked his clothes up off the bed and swiftly dressed. He could not resist roaming the room, looking without prying, mostly just settling his own scent there. Their smells combined made him growl low and deep in satisfaction. If he had his way, this room would soon be theirs, and no other scents would invade it.

But the sound of a car pulling up dragged his mind back to less pleasant matters. Pounding down the stairs, he only just barely avoided crashing into Ferdy, who oofed as he found himself caught up. Brayton nuzzled his cheek, teeth just barely nipping his chin. "Hey, baby."

Ferdy flushed. "Um—hey. I guess you caught him?"

"Yeah. Kirby is bringing him by to break your curse." He rubbed his thumb over Ferdy's bottom lip then kissed him briefly.

Ferdy nodded, but didn't say anything. Brayton didn't really expect him to; he was astonished Ferdy was taking everything as well as he was. Hopefully, with the curse, gone, Ferdy would regain his equilibrium and be himself again. After that, they could start to figure shit out.

Reluctant to let him go, even if he was excited the curse was finally going to be broken, Brayton half-dragged, half-led Ferdy outside. Kirby was just taking Kerry from the cruiser as they joined the others.

Kerry, Brayton saw, looked oddly subdued. Lifeless, really. All the snarl and bite he'd exhibited before was long gone. It was like someone had flipped a switch and turned him completely off. Or maybe, more like someone had tripped a circuit.

"Break the curse," Kirby said, giving Kerry a shake. "Don't try anything."

"I won't," Kerry said, voice a monotone.

Kirby eyed him. "I mean it. Don't try—"

"I said I won't," Kerry snapped, life flaring up for a moment before it went out of him again.

Frowning, Kirby nevertheless released him from the handcuffs and the binding spell he'd cast. Brayton nudged Ferdy forward, but stayed close, hovering protectively in case the asshole did try something.

Instead of approaching Ferdy, however, Kerry merely brought his hands together and closed his eyes—then drew his hands apart as though tearing something in half, and words of magic poured into the dark morning—

And even as Kirby cried out in dismay, the words stopped, and Kerry fell to the ground. Dead.

Brayton didn't know what to say.

"Why would he do that?" Ferdy asked shakily. "Why?"

Kirby looked grim as he knelt down beside the body. "I don't think he knew she was pregnant. She didn't tell him. Goddamn it, I really do believe it was an accident. What a fucking mess; he should have told someone."

"He killed himself with magic?" Peter asked softly.

"Sort of," Kirby said.

Low growled. "What do you mean?"

Brayton stirred at that, skills and knowledge kicking in. "He broke a curse. Those words were for curse breaking. But breaking the curse killed him. The question is why."

"Here's the answer," Kirby said, indicating a mark low on Kirby's back, just over his left ass cheek.

Kneeling down opposite Kirby, Brayton examined the mark and whistled. "That's powerful work. Whoever cast this was top of his class and probably had the teacher sucking *him* off."

Kirby snorted in amusement. "That is certainly one way to put it."

"What do you mean?" Low asked, and it was sort of *vastly* amusing he looked as unused to such comments as Ferdy. They both were slightly flushed, and obviously not certain what to say to it. Man, didn't anyone talk dirty to them? He shot Peter an unimpressed look, but he only rolled his eyes.

Getting back to the matter at hand, Brayton replied, "This curse is extremely complex and powerful. It's what they call a 'binding curse' or, in slang, a cage. Kerry was trapped in Midsummer, just as he said. If he ever left it, the curse would kill him. If he tried to remove the curse, it would kill him. So that's what he did tonight. A curse like this...either Kerry fucked up bad before he came to Midsummer, or someone really hated him. Possibly both. I doubt we'll ever know."

"Killing himself seems extreme," Ferdy said.

Brayton shrugged. "Like Kirby said, I don't think he knew about the baby. He could handle he killed Joni, and I guess whatever he did that got him cursed. I think knowing he killed his own child was more than he could take."

Ferdy seemed to droop. "How sad."

"The entire thing is damned sad, I agree," Brayton replied. "A tragedy start to finish. I wonder who the hell put that curse on him and why."

Kirby shook his head. "I think I know, but I only saw the man briefly and that more than nine years ago. I was still just a wet-behind-the-ears deputy, then. They rolled into town, and the other guy stood out quite a bit. Never got a good look at him, and the next day he was gone, and Kerry was looking for a place to rent. All I remember. I don't think we'll ever solve the mystery. Help me get him in the cruiser; I'll take care of the rest."

When the grisly job was done, Kirby drove off with a brief wave.

"I think we'll pick this up after we're all rested," Peter said into the silence that fell. "We could all use real sleep."

"Agreed," Brayton said. He bid them all goodnight, everyone ignoring the fact they probably should be saying good morning, and watched as they all piled into Peter's car and drove away.

Leaving him alone with Ferdy.

He smiled as he saw Ferdy was already vanishing into the house. He'd be insulted, but well, how could he? Grinning, he strolled into the house himself and made straight for the workshop in the back.

Ferdy was already there, planted on a bench at one of the work tables, elbow deep in the guts of the mechanical toy he'd been moping over before, fingers moving with a fluidity that Brayton could not tear his eyes from—except to enjoy the smile on Ferdy's face.

Still grinning himself, he snagged a stool at one of the two remaining work tables, cleared a small space for himself, and sat down. He rested his head on his arms, content to simply sit and watch his mate be happy until sleep finally snuck up and knocked him out.

He woke with a grunt, staring blearily at whoever was shaking him. Then his nose, eyes, and brain kicked in, and he yawned as he sat up and said, "Baby?"

"You should go to—I'm sorry. I didn't make certain—I got carried away—"

Brayton cut off the stream of words with a clumsy kiss, still too sleep-addled to do better. "S'fine. What times is it?"

"Uh—eight in the morning," Ferdy said, looking guilt stricken.

"Ugh. We're going to bed, Itty-bitty. Did you have fun being a gremlin again?" He smiled as he looked at the fully repaired toy carousel horse on the far table. "Looks good, baby."

Ferdy flushed. "Um. You didn't have to hang around—" Brayton kissed him again, snickering when Ferdy scowled at him. "You can't do that every time you want to shut me up."

"Yes, I can," Brayton said with another yawn. "I liked watching you work, and I know you must be beyond happy to be free of that curse. And now we go to bed."

Matching deed to word, he took Ferdy's hand and dragged him upstairs and into the bedroom. Too tired and groggy to worry about clothes, he fell into the bed and dragged Ferdy with him. He rumbled contentedly then, all but wrapping himself around Ferdy, who was small and wiry and seemed to fit perfectly.

Happy, Brayton fell back asleep.

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Brayton woke up immediately alert and feeling more rested than he had in days.

He also realized he was alone and growled his dissatisfaction. Sitting up, he threw back the blankets he or Ferdy must have pulled up in the night, and climbed out of bed. It wasn't until he reached the door that he noticed his things by the closet—the duffel, toolbox, blankets, and other supplies he always kept in his trunk.

Ferdy must have hauled it all in for him. He'd slept straight through it all; he didn't relax like that except in his own house or his parents' place. Smiling, Brayton dug out fresh clothes, toothbrush, razor, then went in search of a towel.

Half an hour later, he was showered and clean, feeling fine. Pounding down the stairs, he stopped short again to see all his shit in the little dish by the door—keys, wallet, phone, even his smokes...

No, that was a brand new pack. Ferdy had gone out and bought him cigarettes. Lying on top of them was a nice lighter—far above the cheap little gas store ones he was always buying—with a wolf's head and moon etched on either side.

Grinning, Brayton stuffed everything into his pockets minus the smokes and lighter. He opened the cigarettes as he slid outside, then sat down on the front stoop and lit one with his brand new lighter—which he then proceeded to open and close, open and close, before he finally made himself put it away.

To judge by the sun and the smell, it was getting on to late afternoon. Man, when had he last spent an entire day sleeping? Longer than he could remember.

The sunshine was nice, and it took the worst of the bite out of the cool air. He could smell Ferdy not too far off, probably 'round back. Given that Brayton's car was no longer in the front, he had a pretty good idea what Ferdy was up to, silly gremlin.

Smiling, he finished his cigarette and stamped it out then tossed it in an old bucket that looked like it had served that same purpose in the past. Standing, he walked around the house toward the garage bays in the back corner.

As expected, Ferdy was absorbed in the car. Brayton could fix a problem or twelve when his honey broke down, but he couldn't rebuild her from the ground up. He was beyond impressed that Ferdy seemed utterly at home and didn't doubt he'd make it look easy.

"Hey, baby."

Ferdy jumped then jerked his head up. He used his arm to wipe sweat from his brow, but really only succeeded in adding grease. He smiled shyly. "Hi. Sleep well?"

"Best sleep I've had in forever. Thanks for the smokes and the lighter."

Ferdy flushed and ducked his head to hide a brighter smile. "Sure. I had it around, seemed to suit. Umm. I'm working on your car. I guess that's obvious. You can borrow one of mine 'til it's fixed. I'll do a good job; she's a beauty. Um. Hopefully I haven't screwed up your work or—"

Brayton growled into the kiss and grabbed handfuls of Ferdy's ass, pulling him close. Gremlins had always driven him crazy with their smell—oil, dirt, grease, metal, sweat, even blood. But he liked it on Ferdy, the way those scents mingled with Ferdy's scent, that elusive, not quite sweet scent he'd never get tired of smelling.

Hands slick with sweat and grease fisted in Brayton's shirt, and he should have put off his shower a bit, but he really didn't care.

Sinking one hand into Ferdy's hair, sliding the other up to loop around Ferdy's waist, Brayton kissed him until their lips were bruised and they were both short of breath. He lapped lazily at Ferdy's lips as he drew back. "Hey, baby."

"H-hi. Again. Um."

Brayton nipped his nose. "As cute as you look when you're worrying, stop doing it. I'm one hundred percent certain you'll make my car better than she was before." He nuzzled, feeling almost drunk or something akin. It really was no mystery to him now why wolves went so crazy when they found their mates. How could they not?

Being a true lone, and more than content with that, he hadn't thought he'd ever find a mate. His father had, sure, but lone often meant *lone*. If he'd ever been told to guess what his mate might be like, he would never have picked a gremlin.

But right here, right now, he really couldn't imagine anyone more perfect than Ferdy.

"You—" Ferdy clamped his mouth shut.

"I what, baby?"

Ferdy stared at Brayton's chest. "You don't make sense. I'm always getting caught up in my work and forgetting other stuff. I was dumped only days ago, and my ex just killed himself. I'm pretty certain I'm a mess and—"

Brayton kissed him softly. "Baby, I've spent my whole life traveling from one end of the country to the other and back again. My longest relationship lasted a week. I like to smoke, and I've got a possessive streak as wide as the day is long. But I know damned sure you're *my* pint-sized gremlin. The rest is details, and we'll work them out and bump along so long as you want to try."

Ferdy was silent so long that Brayton quietly began to suffer a panic attack, and he was just starting to figure out how to back pedal and save himself *some* measure of dignity—

"Yes," Ferdy said. "I do want to try. It's just—you really didn't seem to like me when we first met."

Brayton smiled and tweaked Ferdy's nose, laughing at the way Ferdy promptly wrinkled it. "I couldn't figure out why you seemed so different, why you *smelled* so different, and why I couldn't keep my mind off thoughts of fucking you."

Ferdy made a strangled, half-laugh, half-moan sound, and to judge by the sudden spike of lust in the air, he probably wouldn't get much argument were he to drag Ferdy back to bed right then.

"Then I say we give us a try, baby," Brayton said, then nibbled and bit at Ferdy's jaw, throat, then back up to cheek, nose, and finally to the delectable mouth he'd already claimed more times than he could count.

Growling when hands fisted in his shirt again, he brought them flush, grinding their erections together, and moved—

Nearly killing them both as he tripped over the bits and pieces of his car.

Ferdy laughed. "By the way, I do usually have a house rule about no messing around in my workshops and the bays."

"You'll get no argument from me," Brayton said and dragged him to the house.

Not willing to attempt the stairs, he settled for the couch, pushing Ferdy down into it and then setting to work on their clothes with greedy determination. Skinny he might be, but Ferdy was definitely not just skin and bones. There was muscle there, wiry and toned, and all manner of old cuts, scrapes, and burns that told dozens upon dozens of gremlin stories.

He got as far as getting their shirts off and their pants undone before he simply ran out of patience. Grabbing hold of Ferdy's cock, he began to stroke, learning the shape and feel of it, memorizing the way Ferdy writhed and twisted, gasped and moaned—

Growling, Brayton bent and took Ferdy's mouth, swallowing every needy, gasping plea. He rumbled in deep satisfaction when Ferdy eventually came hard in his hand, shuddering and shivering against him, Brayton's name tumbling out in a choked cry.

Brayton licked Ferdy's lips, nibbled at jaw and throat—then cried out in surprise as he was suddenly shoved back, tumbling down hard on his back, head hitting the padded armrest on the opposite end. He flailed for balance, one hand landing on the back of the sofa, the other clinging wet and sticky to Ferdy's arm.

His protests died on his lips, though, as he took in the heated, determined look that had already replaced the sated expression on Ferdy's face. Before he could form a sentence, or even a word, however, Ferdy was demonstrating with enthusiasm that his mouth was just as talented as his hands.

Possibly even more so.

Brayton gave up any thought of sentences, settling simply for 'baby' and 'more' and 'goddamn' at irregular intervals, until he came hard enough his vision fritzed out.

When he could more or less function again, he drew Ferdy up to lay full on top of him and stole a sloppy kiss, rumbling at the way Ferdy tasted like them. "You're good at that, baby," he said, voice husky. "Evil good."

Ferdy flushed and settled for resting his head against Brayton's chest. Brayton chuckled and kissed the top of his head and wondered why the hell Kerry had thought he'd anything to bitch about where Ferdy was concerned. He should have been smart enough to appreciate what he had.

But he sensed that Ferdy was only one on a long list of Kerry's fuck ups.

Not that he could really hate the man. Hating the dead was a waste of energy, one, but more importantly—Kerry being a fuck up was the reason that Brayton had come here and found his mate.

Ferdy muttered something, and Brayton stirred. "What was that?"

"I said, we should probably move soon. Kirby called while you were still sleeping, saying he'd be by sometime this evening to talk more about Kerry, though he said he hadn't really learned much. He'll probably come around about six, and it's going on five now."

"Ah," Brayton said. "Then yeah, we should get cleaned up, and I'll really need to go out to buy some new clothes at some point. Which reminds me, I'll have to go fetch my things at some point. Did you want to road trip with me, see my cabin?"

"What?" Ferdy asked, looking surprised. "Umm—yes? I haven't traveled in forever. It could be fun."

"Baby, so long as it's you and me, it'll always be fun."

Ferdy laughed, and kissed him, and Brayton really could not be happier.

Hell, he'd probably still be willing to owe Karl a favor.