

Midsummer Law



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Midsummer Caw

A Tale of Midsummer's Night

Megan Derr

 $\mathcal{K}irby\ dropped$ his pen and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. Reaching for his coffee, he grimaced when the mug was ice-cold to the touch.

He could make another pot, but really he should just go home. It would be warmer there, even if he'd just go stir crazy the way he always did, roaming around his empty house.

Making a face, he picked his pen up again—but his attention was then caught by the pale green post-it on which the pen had landed. The note had been stuck to his phone, but it must have fallen off at some point.

Merry Greyling was the name printed on it in his secretary's tidy hand, with a phone number beneath. It had taken Kirby a week to learn that Kerry had a brother, and another week to track him down. It had been an interesting phone call.

"Hello. My name is Kirby Hindon, I'm Sheriff here in the town of—"

"Midsummer, I know. My brother is dead. I would imagine that's why you're calling."

"If you don't mind me asking, how did you know he was dead, Mr. Greyling?"

"My name is Merry. I felt it, Sheriff. So what did the fool do, try to leave or try to break my curse? Never mind, we'll discuss it when I get there. Thank you for calling."

Kirby shook his head, still not certain what to think of it all. A brother, and one who'd felt it when Kerry died. Not to mention the voice...he had sounded like Kerry, and yet completely not. Despite the grim nature of the phone call, and the strangeness of it...he could not get that voice, somehow cool and smoky, out of his head.

Sighing again, he tried to focus on his paperwork, but his concentration was shot now. May as well head home, then. Still, he managed to stall a good three minutes by straightening and organizing his desk, and another five cleaning out the coffee pot and getting it ready for the next day. Eventually, though, he had no reason to linger.

Nodding goodnight to the man on duty, he bundled up in his coat and gloves and slipped outside. Though technically it was still fall, it was wasting no time turning into winter. The air was biting, and biting hard. Turning left outside the police station, shivering, Kirby walked the four and a half blocks to his little townhouse.

Climbing the steps, he placed a hand on the frosted glass top half of the door, then softly whispered the words to release the protective spell he habitually placed on his home. Too many punks pissed off at the Sheriff for 'ruining our fun, man' had made him more than a little cautious. Slipping inside, he closed and locked the door, then reset the protection spell.

That accomplished, he began to remove all the accourrements of Sheriff, setting the harmless stuff on top of the little cabinet-table in his entryway, putting the more dangerous items safely away inside the cabinet. Lastly, he hung his work hat on its hook next to the black Stetson he wore when he was off duty.

Finished with the first routine of the night, he dragged himself upstairs to go through the second—shower, pajama pants, stand around trying to decide what to do the rest of the night. At least, he thought with some satisfaction, his heating wards seemed to be holding. Three days now and his house was still toastier and cozier than central heating alone could make it, even after Ferdy had fixed the furnace. It was just below freezing outside, but inside he could stand around in just an old pair of black sleep pants and be perfectly comfortable.

If the wards continued to hold, he'd have to try extending them to the front porch; then he wouldn't even have to get dressed to fetch the morning paper.

Yawning, wishing he wasn't too keyed up to sleep, he abandoned his bedroom and padded downstairs to the kitchen. He deliberated there a moment, staring at the coffee machine, then gave a shrug and a silent *fuck it* and set a pot of hazelnut coffee to brewing.

Then he went to the fridge to investigate the possibilities for a late dinner. He didn't turn up a whole lot, but there was enough to make a couple of turkey sandwiches. He stifled a sigh. He'd have to go grocery shopping soon, but ugh, that was where Mrs. Holly always cornered him. He was *really* sick of her poor attempts to settle him down with this nice boy or that sweet girl.

Not a single person in Midsummer was his style. The closest he ever saw was a bunch of wannabe and poser high school kids, and that was not even remotely the same thing at all. He supposed he should just get over himself, but...

He glanced toward the hallway, where he still kept the picture of him and Randy together—the last one. Three months later, Randy was dead, and Kirby had eventually left Midsummer for college because staying had been killing him.

God, first Randy, and now Joni was dead. It made him tired. He should have made certain she'd just run off, instead of simply assuming—

But, well, it had hurt a lot, looking at her and seeing Randy. He hadn't tried to look for her because some part of him was relieved she was gone, and now he'd have to live with that. Shaking his head, feeling way older than thirty four, he set all the sandwich fixings on the table and went to go pour a cup of coffee.

He'd just taken his first sip when the doorbell rang. Damn it. He really hoped there wasn't some emergency. Now that he was actually home and warm, with fresh-brewed coffee, he didn't' actually want to go out again.

Even if he didn't exactly want to stay in and go crazy.

Sometimes, he made no sense even to himself.

He set down his coffee and walked out of the kitchen to the entryway, unlocking the door and opening it—and staring in surprise at an all but vibrating Nicholas, the fifteen year old son of the couple who owned the diner on Main Street. "What's up, Nic?"

"Sheriff! Sheriff! There's a man what's here to see you. He's real strange, Sheriff. But dad told him where to find you, and I think Officer Kent pointed him here, and mom and dad told me to come let you know—that's his car now!"

He pointed at a sleek, sporty little black number rumbling down the street.

"Thanks, son," Kirby said, amused as always by the speed at which news traveled in a small town. "Run along home now, I can handle this."

Even if he was in only his sleep pants, with nothing more than this mother's amulet for magic and protection. Who the hell would be coming to see him at this hour? And from out of town, at that.

He stood waiting on the stoop as the car parked on the street in front of his house, stifling a groan as he anticipated the neighbors talking up a storm about this one. He'd have to dodge Mrs. Holly for two weeks straight.

But all thoughts of Mrs. Holly and everything else fled as the driver stepped out of the car. His entire body went tight with immediate *want* and he struggled in vain to regain his equilibrium, but holy shit. He couldn't see much of the man's face in the dark, with the way his shoulder-length hair fell across it, but the rest of him...

The rest of him was all that the kids tried so hard to emulate with torn lace and black make-up, but never really achieved. He wore well-fitted leather pants and heavy boots, and a leather jacket cut to mid-thigh and as beautifully fitted as the pants. Beneath it, he wore a shirt that could have been a perfectly ordinary button-down except that it was made of layers of black and red lace. Around his throat was a silver chain threaded with more black lace.

As he drew closer, Kirby could see the ruby studs in his ears, the various rings on his fingers, the bracelets on his wrist. He wore purple eye shadow that should have looked bad against the touches of red, but really only looked damned good, and black lipstick that made it damned hard to stop looking at his mouth.

But as he reached the stairs and looked up, even lust could not keep Kirby from a startling revelation. "Holy shit. You didn't say you were Kerry's *twin* brother."

The black lips twisted bitterly. "Not by choice. You must be Sheriff Hindon. My name is Merry Greyling. Is now a bad time to find out how and why my brother's dead?"

Kirby shook his head and stepped back, motioning him inside. "No. Come in, please. I'll go get dressed. There's coffee and sandwiches if you want them."

Merry only nodded, and strode past him, and despite everything Kirby was sucker punched by lust again as the smells of leather and lace and a hint of lemon and strawberries washed over him. He swallowed, hard, and went to get dressed.

Upstairs, he moved to the bedroom window and opened it, letting the cold air jar him.

Kerry had a twin brother. Twin hobgoblins. Christ. No fucking wonder Kerry had been so powerful, and the curse on Kerry was so complicated. Twins were a powerful thing in any supernatural race. Ugh, and the hobgoblin downstairs in his kitchen looked like he could have been descended from the notorious Puck himself.

His cock twitched, and Kirby groaned. He had no goddamn business lusting after Kerry's twin brother. Not when he'd been the one to tell Kerry that Joni had been pregnant with Kerry's child. Not when those words had driven Kerry to suicide.

What a fucking mess. Like the whole problem of Kerry wasn't hard enough, without his gothed-out beauty of a twin showing up in the dead of night like something out of a story.

Or a wet dream, he thought sourly. Slamming the window shut, he moved to his dresser and yanked out jeans and his favorite blue sweater. He wondered what sort of half-wit yokel sheriff impression he'd made greeting Merry in his pajamas, caught getting the freshest gossip from the son of the diner owner.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he pulled out some socks, then forced himself to stop hiding and go back downstairs.

Merry sat at the kitchen table, hands wrapped loosely around a cup of coffee—the old, pale blue one his mother had liked to use, and Kirby noted he took his coffee black.

At some point Merry had discarded his jacket, and Kirby did his damnedest not to stare—but Christ the man looked good. His lean shoulders fitted the lace shirt entirely too well, and the long throat looked made for the chain-and-ribbon necklace. Oddly, his blonde hair wasn't dyed. The contrast looked damned good, though, so he supposed Merry had good reason for leaving it alone.

Hoping he wasn't staring like a half-wit with his first crush, the way he suspected, Kirby crossed the room and extended his hand. "Kirby Hindon. Sorry for the unorthodox greeting. I'd say welcome to Midsummer, but, well, I'm only sorry it's tragedy that's brought you this way."

Merry shook his hand, grip firm, brief—nails painted a deep, deep crimson. "I'm sorry to arrive so late. I could see you were headed to bed. This can wait until the morning, if you like."

Kirby smiled despite himself, as he sat down. "Nah. This is Midsummer. Midnight ain't too different from midday."

"I see. So what happened to Kerry?"

His momentary levity faded, and Kirby toyed with his own coffee mug a moment. "Your brother committed suicide."

Merry's mouth tightened. "I see. Did he bother to leave a note as to why?"

"Wasn't necessary," Kirby said, feeling tired all over again. "The matter is a bit complicated."

"Of course it is," Merry said, voice biting, but for the briefest flicker of a moment, he looked as weary as Kirby felt. "Everything is complicated when Kerry is involved." He took a sip of his coffee, then another, and finally a third, before he said, "Tell me what happened."

Kirby took a sip of his own coffee, then started to tell the story, staring with how Ferdy had been working on the clock tower, and then one afternoon was suddenly cursed. "The clock tower was rigged with all sorts of traps when we got a look at it, shortly after a wolf was hit bad by some bane. All the traps were meant to discourage anyone from finding the body hidden beneath the floor right below the clockwork mechanism Ferdy had been disassembling."

"I see," Merry said. "Why did he kill her?"

"He said it was an accident, and, to be honest, I believe him. She wanted to leave town. He couldn't. They fought. She fell down the stairs and landed at the bottom with a broken neck."

"He's a liar," Merry said, voice as frigid as the air outside. "He's murdered in cold blood before, and I'd hoped he wouldn't do it again—"

"She was pregnant," Kirby cut in. "She didn't tell him, only god knows why. The way he acted when I told him, I do believe that. He could take killing her, but not his own child. It was his, of that we were certain. When I dropped the binding I put on him so he could break Ferdy's curse, he broke his own instead."

Merry said nothing for a long time, simply frowned at his coffee. Kirby was usually good at reading people; his job relied on it, but not so much a peep of Merry's thoughts gave itself away on his face.

He looked away before he started staring at Merry for other, wholly inappropriate reasons.

"So my good for nothing brother was capable of caring about something besides himself."

Kirby said nothing. What was there to say?

"What did you do with him?" Merry asked.

"We went ahead and cremated him. Seemed the right thing to do." He didn't have to add that with paranormal creatures, that was the standard practice. No good ever came from leaving them somewhere a normal would find them, and it happened more often than anyone liked.

Merry nodded. "Where are the ashes? I'd like to take them home to be with my parents, unless there's a reason I can't?"

"No reason at all. You can take them," Kerry said. "I've got them locked up and warded in the office. We can go get them now if you want."

Merry hesitated, then finally nodded and said, "Probably best. The sooner this is all done, the sooner I and my brother can cease to be trouble for you. And I am sorry for the trouble, Sheriff."

"It's not your fault. Though, if I may, I would like to know why you cursed your own brother that way."

"Because he deserved it, and because I honestly thought it would help. I'm afraid the rest I do not feel like discussing, unless of course the law demands it, Sheriff."

Kirby felt a flash of annoyance and disappointment. Sheriff, he was always Sheriff. It wasn't fair, of course in these circumstances that's the only way Merry would regard him—but people always made those damned jabs about 'the law' like he'd only ask because of it. Like it was impossible he might simply want to know. Hell, he hadn't hated Kerry. The man had been an ass, and he'd treated Ferdy like shit, but it wasn't hard to see the man had been kicked by life as often as he'd done the kicking.

"I'm not bringing the law into it," he finally replied, not quite able to keep all the stiffness from his voice. He finished his coffee and stood. "If you'll just come along, we'll get your brothers ashes and then Midsummer will cease to be a bother to you."

In the entryway, he got his boots out and sat down on the stairs to pull them on and lace them. Stamping them into place to settle them, he then shrugged into his black corduroy jacket. Then he grabbed his wallet, keys, pocket knife, and lastly his black Stetson. He slid it onto his head as Merry joined him in the hallway.

Why did looking at Merry keep leaving him feeling sucker punched? Honestly, why did he have to have such a *thing* for that goth look, and why did Kerry's twin brother of all people have to do it so fucking well?

Biting back several choice curses, he turned toward the front door and yanked it open, then motioned. "After you."

Merry gave him the briefest puzzled look, then nodded and brushed by him. Kirby was again struck by his scent—that oddly bright and spring-like strawberries and lemon smell. He was never going to sleep tonight, he thought as he settled his hat more firmly on his head against the breeze that had kicked up. He reset his protections, then joined Merry on the sidewalk.

Definitely no sleep, he thought again, looking at Merry. Not without doing dirty things while thinking about Merry, and was a more direct route to hell possible? He didn't think so.

"Station is only about five blocks this way," Kirby said, pointing a thumb up the street. "You good for walking, or would you prefer to drive?"

"I'm capable of walking, Sheriff."

"I didn't ask if you could walk, I asked if you were good for it. I'm sure you've been driving for hours, to get here as quickly as you did. You must be tired, not to mention you're only here because your brother is dead. So, are you good for walking?"

Merry seemed to slump for a moment—but like every other crack in his armor, it was gone in the very next breath. "Yes, I am fine for walking."

Nodding, Kirby started walking, remaining silent as Merry fell into step alongside him.

"I'm sorry about the girl and the baby he killed," Merry said a couple of minutes later.

"It's not your fault, but thank you," Kirby replied.

Merry shook his head. "I am somewhat responsible, since I am the one who chained him here."

Kirby shook his head. "He made his own choices; you're not responsible for those. That was quite the curse, though, hobgoblin. He always hid it, but you don't—the magic blazes off you." Something he'd only really just noticed, his brain too clouded by lust and guilt and aggravation. But, it was true; Merry was about as subtle with his magic as he was with his dress. He didn't think Merry did subtle very often.

Merry's black lips curved in a quirky, pretty little smile that disappeared entirely too soon. "You're not too bad yourself, witch. It would take a good eight hours to break all the wards and spells on your home."

"Eight?" Kirby repeated, offended. "No way. Those spells are better than that."

That brief smile again, too pretty for the otherwise solemn demeanor, the shadowed, shuttered eyes. "Maybe I'm better than you, witch."

Kirby reached up absently to touch the pendant at his throat, the talisman his mother had given him before she'd died. It had been passed down from mother to daughter in her family for generations—at least as long as the Hindons had lived in Midsummer, which was nearly as long as its founding Top Vamp.

The amulet was beautiful—a pentacle twined with roses, all done in silver and gold. Simple, but extremely powerful.

Also, pointedly feminine in design and energy. But then, Kirby's energy, much to his mortification growing up, had always had something of the feminine to it. They'd always attributed it to the fact that he should have been a girl. It was always girls, in his mother's line, and his grandmother swore until her dying day that it made no sense he'd been born a boy.

Even the damned wolves said he always smelled funny—like cinnamon and roses. *Like a girl* one wit had offered, and Kirby had come really close to arresting him for disrespecting an officer. He was as guy as guy could get, except that people who felt his magic before they saw him always thought he was a girl.

"No way," he finally said, though it was probably true that Merry was stronger than him. A twin and a hobgoblin? It probably would only take Merry eight hours to break down his wards, even if Kirby didn't want to admit it. "So is magic what you do for a living?"

"No, magic is a hobby," Merry replied. "I make clothes, mostly the kind I wear, but other stuff as well. Custom, of course, though I have a website where I sell more generic pieces."

Kirby smiled and pulled lightly at the brim of his hat. "Sounds a good sight calmer than being Sheriff."

Merry snorted. "At least you can lock them up. I designed this 'vampire' wedding dress for a normal once, and it wasn't quite what she wanted even though I'd done everything she requested. She freaked

out and got really nasty. It would have been nice if I could have locked her up, but I finally had to give her a ten percent discount before she'd shut up."

Kirby made a face, sympathizing. "Yeah, people like that, I wish being obnoxious or stupid was against the law—but then we'd run out of places to put them."

"That is certainly true," Merry said with a laugh.

He wished he could keep Merry laughing and smiling, but as they reached the police station, the momentary levity died. Opening the door, he motioned for Merry to precede him.

"Hey, Sheriff," greeted the man on duty, Ted. He only looked sort of surprised to see Kirby again. "I see your out of town friend found you." His tone of voice said he wasn't yet convinced that was a good thing.

Kirby hid a smile. "Yeah, my friend found me. Anyone else been in tonight, Ted?"

Ted rolled his eyes. "Ol' Cutter came in drunker'en six skunks. I put him in cell two for the night. Then Nic, of course, and not ten minutes later Mrs. Holly. You just missed her. Want I should call her back?" He grinned.

"You do and I'll tell your mama where you go on Friday nights."

"Now that's not nice, Sheriff."

"Neither is siccing Mrs. Holly on me." Leaving Ted at the desk, he led Merry back to his office and closed the door. He strode to his desk, a massive u-shaped thing with a row of cabinets set in the back portion. Kneeling, he opened the left-most cabinet to reveal the safe set in it.

He punched in the digital code, then swung the safe open and pulled out the small urn inside. It was simple, plain silver, with nothing more than Kerry's name and the necessary dates stamped into it. Standing, he turned to Merry and held it out. "I'm very sorry," he said quietly. "I really am. I should have been able to stop him."

"My brother always was as wily as a goblin," Merry said, voice somber. "Even I couldn't stop him in the end. Thank you for your condolences, Sheriff, and for taking care of him until I could get here. I'll get out of your hair now."

"You—" Kirby reached up reflexively then fisted his hand and let it drop. "You're not in my way." He hesitated, then decided fuck it. "Look—it's just past one in the morning. You should get some sleep. If you don't have a place to crash, you can certainly crash with me. If you don't want to do that, I can recommend you to one of the two B&B's in town. But, uh, this is a small town. Everyone's nosy. I guarantee every last citizen knows you're here by now, and by morning they'll have some idea you're connected to Kerry. Staying with me will at least guarantee you some peace and quiet until you leave."

Merry looked like he wanted to argue, but in the end he only gave the barest nod. "Sleep would be nice. If you don't mind putting up with me for the night, Sheriff, I'll take that offer. I can pay—"

"Payment's not necessary, and neither is Sheriff. My name is Kirby."

Merry looked up and met his eyes, and Christ he looked so much like Kerry beneath the make-up and yet nothing like him at all. Kerry's eyes had never made him forget how to breathe, for certain. "Kirby. Thank you."

"Come on, then," Kirby said, and led him back through the office. "G'night, Ted."

Ted stared in surprise to see Merry holding Kerry's ashes, but at a look from Kirby only said, "Night, Sheriff."

Outside, they walked in silence back to Kirby's house. "Your car should be safe enough—"

Merry laughed, short, brief, a trifle forced, as he moved to his car and took a duffle out of the trunk. He locked it again, then set a spell that Kirby felt hard enough he shivered. "My car will be fine."

Kirby nodded, and got them inside his house, then reset all his wards and put away his hat and other things. "Would you like to eat?"

"No, but thanks. Now that sleep has been suggested, I think that's all I really want."

"This way, then," Kirby said, and led him upstairs. He strode past his room, to the room which had been his growing up. After his folks had died, he'd rented an apartment for six months and gutted the house, remodeling it from the ground up. His parents' room was now his, and his old bedroom was a perpetually empty guest room. The last bedroom was little more than a giant closet, since he'd never found a good use for it.

He flicked on the light to the guest room, grateful he got so bored and restless some night he did crazy things like clean the house top to bottom for the millionth time. "It's not much," he said.

Merry shook his head and said, "No, it's more than fine. Thank you."

"Sure," Kirby said. "I'll leave you in peace. It's got its own bathroom, let me know if there's anything you need."

"I will. Thanks, Sh-Kirby."

"Good night."

"Night."

Wishing he knew what to say or do, but utterly lost in this particular situation, Kirby simply did as he said he would and left Merry alone, quietly closing the door and going back downstairs to finally eat his turkey sandwich alone in the kitchen.

Somehow, the old blue mug stained with black lipstick sitting on the far side of the table only made the loneliness more acute.

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Kirby stared, confused, at the boxes stacked neatly in front of his desk. There were three of them; ordinary brown boxes sealed with clear packing tape. Half-turning, he called for his secretary. "Nancy! What are these boxes?"

But even as he finished asking the question, he saw the answer for himself. On the right end of each box, someone had printed *Kerry Greyling – Personal Effects* in sharpie. Kerry. Which immediately led to thoughts of Merry. Two weeks later, it still lay in his stomach like bad meat, the way he'd woken up to find Merry gone.

"Never mind," he said as Nancy appeared. "No—you can tell me why they're in my office."

Nancy looked at him with fond amusement. "The boys finally got around to cleaning out Kerry's old place. Most of the stuff they gave away, carted to the shelter in Trenton; but the personal stuff, they were at a bit of a loss. I said to put it here, that you'd take care of it."

"Yeah," Kirby said, stifling a sigh. "I'll take care of it. Oh, yeah. Call Ms. Pearson. I caught her boy out by the old tracks with those Wither boys. I think I scared some sense into him, but tell his mom he's gonna be made to stew here a bit longer just to be sure. She can come pick him up around supper time."

Clucking her tongue and muttering about silly boys, Nancy nodded to him and wandered back out of his office.

Kirby moved around his desk and dropped down into his seat. He stared at the phone, heart pounding. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He'd only known Merry a few hours. They'd only met because Kirby had failed to keep Kerry from committing suicide—had failed at a lot. Merry had snuck out of his house rather than face him and say goodbye.

Still, he could not get the man out of his head. How beautiful he'd been, in leather and lace and black lipstick. How reserved he'd been, except for their short walk to the police station when he'd smiled and laughed. That scent of lemon and strawberries.

The way it had taken him a week to finally wash that stupid blue mug.

He'd lost count of the number of times he'd picked up the phone to call Merry, on one stupid pretext or another, always hanging up before the phone could ring. The post it with Merry's number had been thrown out ages ago, after he realized he had Merry's number memorized.

Now here he was with a perfectly good reason to call, and he couldn't pick up the damned phone. Pathetic. He rubbed at his temples, then reached out blindly with one hand to fumble open his top drawer and locate the bottle of aspirin within. Getting the bottle open, he used the iced tea leftover from lunch to wash down four.

"You take too much of that stuff," Nancy said in her tart lord-of-the-office voice. "I spoke with Ms. Pearson." She gave him a little smirk. "I also called up Mr. Greyling and arranged with him for someone to take Kerry's stuff to him."

Kirby frowned. "You what?"

"He lives a good eight to nine hours north. Said he was too busy with orders and the looming holidays to come fetch them any time soon. I said no trouble, we'd just take them to him, it was the least we could do."

"I didn't tell you to call him."

Nancy snorted. "Honey, if I waited for a man to tell me what to do, nothing would ever get done. You were staring at that phone so hard I thought you'd break something. Now, if you leave within the hour you should get up there right around ten. If I were you, I'd make a long weekend of the trip and not come back 'til Monday."

"What—" Kirby jerked. "Me? Nancy, I can't just up and take four days off. Send one of the boys."

"No," Nancy said flatly. "I think you need to go see that man, and I'll not tolerate any argument on the matter."

Not even bothering to point out he was the Sheriff, and therefore her boss, Kirby said instead, "Why do I have to do it?"

Nancy planted her feet and braced her hands on her hips, green eyes flashing as she said, "Honey, you've been growling around this office like a bear with a thorn in his paw. Now I don't know what happened when that man came, or what was said, but I do know what yesterday was and that this is the first time in nineteen years you haven't noticed. You will go see him." Turning around on her heel, she marched out of his office, slamming the door shut behind her.

Kirby barely noticed. Oh, god. She was right. Yesterday...yesterday had been nineteen years to the day since Randy died. Nineteen years since Randy was killed in a car accident on a bright summer afternoon. They'd been together every day of their lives since they were three, and more than friends since they'd started high school—and sudden as that, the boy he'd loved forever had been gone.

None of them had ever been the same. Randy's parents never really recovered, and finally moved away. Joni, Randy's baby sister, had wandered down a path from which she'd never come back. Kirby had gone through the rest of high school in a black cloud, and only made it to college because his father had all but beaten him and his mother had cried herself sick with worry. It was only at college he'd managed to move past the grief, the sense that part of him was missing.

After college and a few years on the Trenton police force, he'd moved back to Midsummer at the age of twenty five. Someway, somehow, a few years later he'd found himself Sheriff of his hometown.

But not once in all those years and everything they'd contained, had he missed remembering Randy all over again on the day he died.

Until yesterday.

Kirby covered his face with his hands and took several slow, deep breaths. Standing, he put his hat on and strode to his office door, yanking it open. He continued out to the main room and paused at Nancy's desk. "I'll be back to fetch the boxes. Tell the boys I'll be back at work on Monday. Thanks, Nancy."

"Don't do anything stupid," Nancy admonished, then winked at hm. "We'll see you Monday, Sheriff."

Kirby shook his head, equal parts amused and terrified. Don't do anything stupid, she said. Wasn't that what they called driving nine hours to see a virtual stranger on a paper thin excuse? When it would probably amount to nothing, especially considering all the obstacles in the way? Like Kerry. And they were strangers. And Merry was Kerry's twin brother. He might not even be gay. He probably had a lover, or several options better than a podunk Sheriff. They lived nine hours apart.

He was driving himself crazy.

The walk home took no time at all, a fact which normally suited him fine but right now he wished he lived more like eight blocks away. But once inside, he couldn't seem to make himself stall. He showered and changed, then threw a bunch of clothes and supplies into a duffle bag, packed a cooler for the trip, and when he went back to fetch the boxes at the office he knew Nancy would have directions and all printed out for him.

Last of all, he picked up his Stetson, feeling a bit more balanced with it firmly on his head. Stupid, he didn't doubt it, but he'd take his equilibrium where he could get it. He turned away toward the front door, then stopped and turned around, walking down the hallway to the little table where a cluster of pictures were arranged. His parents, dead now five years. His grandmother, dead nearly fifteen. Other family and friends, some dead, some alive. Center-most of all the pictures, though, was the one of him and Randy on Halloween their sophomore year of high school. Six months later, Randy would be dead. Kirby had, in a world of irony, gone dressed as a cop. Randy had dressed up as an angel—a dark, gothic, female angel because he'd wanted to make his parents mad. Kirby had loved it, though, had been driven crazy by it. They'd had a hell of a lot of fun that night.

With a rough sound, he turned away and strode back to the front door. Outside, he walked down his short little driveway and unlocked the garage, pushing up the rolling door he'd had replaced only two years ago. When he wasn't walking, he was nearly always driving his cruiser. He rarely had reason to take his own car out for a spin.

She was still a beauty, though, when he pulled the cover off—a sweet little Mustang he'd bought in college, repaired by Ferdy, painted midnight blue with racing stripes. Even now, looking at her still made him smile. Sliding behind the wheel, he backed her down the driveway. Leaving her in park, he got out and locked up the house and garage, then set heavy wards on both.

Climbing back into the car, he drove to the station. Nancy was waiting outside with a meekly obedient Ted and the three boxes. "Ted, load those boxes and no scratches or its your life," she ordered. "Kirby, honey, here's directions and his addresses—work and home. Try to have a good weekend, whatever happens or doesn't, hmm?"

"I will, Nancy. Don't let them burn anything down while I'm gone."

"They won't," Nancy said, eying Ted, who attempted to look very innocent and disinclined toward burning so much as a candle. Turning back to Kirby, Nancy gave him a light push. "Get on with you, now."

"Bye," Kirby said, and kissed her cheek. Then he slid behind the wheel of his car, set his hat on the passenger seat, and drove out of Midsummer.

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The girl at the counter was quite the sight—beautiful, winsome in a spooky sort of way, and if he had any interest in girls he'd be on her in a New York minute. She wore a cute little dress made of velvet and lace that fell just past mid-thigh, with a wide skirt flounced high by lace petticoats in black, purple, red, and white. Below the skirt, she wore black lace tights and chunky, platform mary janes. More lace adorned her arms in elbow-length gloves, decorated with little gold and silver spiders. More of the spiders were in her hair, which was dyed in stripes of black and violet.

She looked at him in curiosity and amusement. "Hey, there. Um. If you're looking for the denim shop, it's about three doors down. The leather store is across the street, though, if *that's* what you want."

Kirby smiled sheepishly, wondering just how out of place he looked and deciding he didn't want to know the answer. He took his hat off and raked a hand through his hair. "Howdy. I'm actually looking for Merry Greyling. This is his place, isn't it?"

"Oh!" the girl said, contact-purple eyes popping open wide. Then she whirled around, braced her hands on the door frame to the backrooms, and bellowed, "Hey, Mer! There's a cowboy here to see you!"

The words were almost immediately followed by a crash and the sound of glass breaking. Before Kirby could ask if everything was okay, the little spider girl whipped back around and smiled at him. "He said you were handsome, not that you were hot as hell."

"What—" Kirby blushed, something he hadn't done in years, making her giggle, but really—what? Before he could figure out what to say or do, though, Merry appeared.

Damn it. He'd half hoped his memories had exaggerated the man. If anything, they'd dulled him. Spider webs seemed to be the day's theme. Merry's baggy pants were a deep scarlet underneath, overlaid with black that had spider webs cut out at random intervals. His long-sleeved shirt was tight—extremely tight—black fabric on which had been sewn more spider webs in glittering red glass beads. He wore a black leather choker and spider earrings, black eye shadow, his top lip painted dark red, the bottom one black.

His hair...he had obviously worn it down, but at some point had grown impatient with it and pulled it sloppily up in one of those giant hair clips Ted was always stealing from Cathy at the bakery. It was cute. He could see Merry had forgotten about it.

Merry looked at him, eyes wide for a moment before he got his expression under control. "Kirby. Uh—"

"Howdy," Kirby said again, then didn't know what else to say.

The spider girl giggled. "Oh, my god. It's so cute how you say that. Say it again."

"What-"

"Kimmy," Merry growled. "Go finish up for me in the back. Now."

"Fine, fine," Kimmy said with a pout. "Give me back my hairclip."

"Wha—" Realization dawned and Merry tore the clip out of his hair, throwing it at her.

Giggling again, Kimmy caught the clip and darted off, vanishing into the back.

Merry looked at Kirby again, clearly at a loss. Kirby's heart sank. What had he expected? For Merry to be pleased? He'd probably hoped never to see or hear from Kirby and Midsummer again. "I've got Kerry's things," he finally said. "Went by your place, but your neighbor said you'd be here."

"The majority of my clientele is paranormal, or normals who wish they were. I do a lot of work at weird hours," Merry said, almost smiling. "But you said it's pretty much the same for you."

"Yeah. If you'll tell me where to put the boxes, I'll get out of your hair."

Merry hesitated, then said, "Give me a moment to take care of things here and we can take them to my house. You didn't have to bring them so quickly."

Kirby shrugged. "I've got the weekend off. A road trip seemed a nice break."

"Are you headed back tonight?"

Kirby studied him, looking for some clue, some indication...but like before, reading Merry was frustratingly impossible. "I hadn't planned anything, really."

"Then the least I can do is offer you a place to crash, since you helped me."

"Does that mean I should copy you and sneak off while you're sleeping?" Kirby asked quietly.

Merry flinched. "I shouldn't have done that."

"Why did you?"

"Because Kerry being dead was harder than I thought it would be, and you shouldn't have had to put up with that."

Kirby studied him again, startled by the honest answer. Finally he nodded, and replaced his hat. "Fair enough. I'll take that offer. Should I wait for you outside?"

"Nah, wait right here," Merry replied. "It'll take me about fifteen minutes, then we can go."

Kirby nodded, but Merry was already gone. Shrugging, he turned and moseyed around the store, poking and prodding at the clothes and other things Merry had on display, for sale, trying not to picture Merry in all of it and failing miserably.

He was staring at a display of lacy things and thinking of Merry in just lace and black lipstick, when he heard someone come up behind him a split second before Merry asked, "See something you like, Sheriff? I didn't see you as a lace man."

Kirby coughed and barely bit his tongue in time against reply that it depended entirely upon who was wearing the lace. "Not as such, no. It doesn't suit me."

Merry looked at him in amusement and, was that wishful thinking, or had that been a spark of—

Wishful thinking. Had to be. He didn't know how he'd cope if he raised his hopes on wishful thinking and lust, only to have them come crashing down beneath the weight of reality.

"No, you look more like leather than lace," Merry finally replied.

Kirby snorted. "Your little clerk thought the same thing. She told me the leather stuff was across the street."

"I see," Merry said, voice turning cool. "Well, let me know if you decide to go, I can get you a discount there."

"Nah," Kirby said, confused. "End of the day, I'm just a Joe Blow. All set?"

"Yes. This way. You can follow me, though you might already know the way?"

"More or less. You have a nice home."

"It serves its purpose," Merry replied, and pushed the shop door open, leading the way outside.

Kirby really hadn't missed big cities. He'd gotten used to them, while he was away at school and then just starting to learn the ropes of police work, but he hadn't been sorry to see the last of them. Even Trenton had been too big. He liked his small, everyone-knows-everyone town. He wouldn't trade a single part of it for anything in the world, not even Mrs. Holly.

Someone like Merry probably wanted nothing to do with such a one-horse town, even pretending for a moment all the other issues resolved themselves.

The drive to Merry's house was a relatively short one, and he parked his mustang on the street while Merry pulled into the driveway. Popping the trunk, he waited for Merry to join him. "I'm sorry to bring all this to your doorstep. I'm sure you'd like to be left in peace."

Merry shook his head. "It's fine. We can put them in the living room." So saying, he hefted one of the boxes and led the way up the walk. Magic rolled off his tongue as they drew close to the house, and the door swung open for them.

Kirby felt the brush of wards as he stepped into the house, and acknowledged sourly that breaking them would easily take him twelve hours. Not that he'd concede it aloud. He followed Merry into what proved to be the living room.

As wow as Merry tended to be, he had almost expected the house to be equally so, but it was simple and rather colorful. The carpet was thick, soft, and a deep, smoky gray in color. The couch took up most of the space, a massive wrap around thing in black suede. All the tables and stands were black-stained wood and glass. But it was the random splashes of color that really drew the eye – red, blue, and violet throw pillows, deep red drapes, a painting over the mantel of a merry-go-round, and one whole wall dedicated to carnivale masks.

"You can set the boxes here," Merry said, setting his own down beside a bookcase. "I'll go through them..." He shrugged and motioned vaguely. "Later."

Kirby nodded. "I'll just go fetch my bag and lock up my car."

"I'm going to change into non work clothes," Merry said. "If you want to unwind yourself, your room is the down the hall, last door on the right."

"Thanks," Kirby said, and bit back an urge to protest. Work clothes? Did Merry not usually prefer his goth look? But it's what he'd worn when he'd come to Midsummer—

Turning around, Kirby strode back outside before he said or did something he shouldn't, or simply stood around sulking and pouting. Outside, he fetched his duffel, then locked and warded his car before trudging back to the house and down the hall to his room for the night.

It was a tidy little room, mostly green and brown, serviceable furniture, and the bed looked comfy. He very pointedly did not think about how Merry's room might look, or how comfortable his bed might be.

Sighing at himself, he stripped off the sweater he'd been wearing for nine hours straight, put on a fresh undershirt, then pulled on a dark green, long-sleeved t-shirt that Nancy had said he was never allowed to wear into the station again, if he expected people to get work done.

With nothing else to do to stall, he wandered back down the hall to the living room. He walked aimlessly around, looking at the masks, the cheerful painting, and finally the bookcase. Spell books, he realized eagerly, and some of them the kind nearly impossible to come by, price-wise, especially in a small town like Midsummer.

Unable to help himself, he pulled one off the shelf and thumbed carefully through it. He had all of five spell books to his name, and borrowed where he could from others in town. There were easily thirty of the things sitting on Merry's shelves.

"Somehow, I knew you'd go for the books."

Kirby jerked guiltily, and glanced up—and nearly swallowed his tongue. Christ, the man needed to come with a warning or something.

If there was a difference between 'work' and 'normal' he couldn't spot it. Instead of the spider web ensemble, Merry wore black jeans that hugged him just fine up top, and got baggier toward the bottom. The shirt was just as tight as the last one, but deep, deep violet—and the long sleeves were something else again. They were open straight down the outside, kept together by a trail of little black and violet ribbons, strung through gold eyelets before being tied. The jeans were held on Merry's hips by a studded leather belt, and the plain leather collar from before had been replaced by one to match the belt. His earrings, Kirby noted, were miniature handcuffs. The black eye shadow remained, but now both his lips were painted black.

"Something wrong?" Merry asked, looking faintly amused.

Great, Kirby thought morosely, he was going yokel sheriff again. "Uh—work and play don't seem to be much different."

Merry smiled. "Cost. The outfit I had on before was about eight hundred dollars in fabric, design, and detailing. The beadwork for those damned spider webs was a bitch, let me tell you. This outfit barely costs a hundred. I don't care what happens to these clothes."

"Those ribbons don't look like they'd be fun to tie," Kirby said. Though he'd be more than happy to tie them if it meant he first got to untie them.

"They weren't," Merry said with a laugh, reaching up absently to touch them. "But after I did it, I made certain they wouldn't come undone."

"Ah," Kirby said, and shoved his stupid disappointment firmly down.

Merry walked across the room to join him at the bookcase. "I just knew you'd hone in on the books."

Kirby smiled sheepishly and put away the one he'd been holding. "I admit I'm jealous. I'm lucky I own five, and you've got dozens."

"When you sell two hundred dollar jeans to high school kids, and obscenely expensive custom work to fellow lifers, you wind up with extra cash," Merry said wryly. "But, some of them I inherited from my dad; he was hobgoblin."

"My mother had the magic in my family."

Smirking, Merry said, "That would explain your unusual energies."

"Yeah, yeah," Kirby groused, scrubbing a hand through his hair.

Merry laughed. "I'm the one wearing lipstick, so I've hardly got room to talk."

"I bet no one ever said 'oh, I thought a girl cast that spell'," Kirby muttered.

"No, but I am often asked why I wear my sister's clothes. Though, to be fair, I deserved that back in the day when I was wearing skirts and stuff."

Kirby drew a sharp, sudden breath that went down the wrong tube and set him to a nasty coughing fit. Merry. In an outfit more like Kimmy's. He was going to die of over-stimulation to the brain. Or cock. "Yeah," he finally managed, voice hoarse from coughing and an excess of imagination, "I can see where you were asking for it, then."

"Mm," Merry agreed, eying him uncertainly. "Are you all right?"

"Just fine. What do you do for food around here?"

"Eat out or order in, mostly. I can sew a hell of a seam, but I can't make so much as a bowl of cereal without something tragic happening."

Kirby laughed. "I'm not much better, but people like to give the Sheriff food, and I can generally manage sandwiches and cereal."

"Then you're miles above me," Merry replied. "I wasn't kidding when I said even a bowl of cereal is too difficult. Would you like to go out, or should I order in?"

"In," Kirby said after a moment's consideration.

"Do you like steak?"

"Was that a rhetorical question?"

Merry smiled, slow and bright. "How do you like it then, witch?"

Kirby almost had to literally bite his tongue on that one, but at last managed to say, "Medium rare."

Nodding, Merry turned away and pulled his cell phone from his pocket, punching in numbers and then placing an order.

Despite himself, Kirby could not resist watching his ass for a moment, before finally forcing himself to turn back to bookshelf in search of distraction. He pulled one out at random and flipped it open to be what proved to be a series of gardening spells. He'd never really gotten to play much with that sort of magic. It was time consuming, and complicated, what with all the variables involved when working with nature.

Such spells would take more time than he had. He closed the book and put it away, not eager to torture himself with things he'd never have the time to enjoy. He got to play with his house wards, that was enough. He reached up absently to touch his necklace.

"It's a beautiful amulet," Merry said, snapping his phone shut and shoving it away as he rejoined Kirby. "May I?"

"Sure," Kirby said, and unclasped the pendant, then dropped it into Merry's palm. "My mother gave it to me." He wouldn't normally just hand it over to another, but...well, he was already painfully aware that Merry was different.

"Exquisite work, and generations of power soaked into it. I know people who would consider the considerable monetary value of this far more important than the sentimental value. The price of this necklace, you could live like a king."

Kirby shook his head. "The sentiment matters more, and anyone who thinks the money matters is a fool."

"I agree," Merry said, and startled Kirby by reaching up and reaffixing the necklace around his neck. Kirby jerked with the urge to reach out, wrap his arms around Merry, keep him close—and he was utterly disappointed when Merry stepped back, and left him feeling a bit colder. "Would you like something to drink? I've got water, juice, tea, beer, and wine."

"A beer would be nice."

Merry motioned with a nod for him to follow, and led the way into the kitchen. It was a handsome kitchen, done in dark blue and green, but devoid of those things that marked a well-used kitchen. Merry opened the fridge and pulled out two beers, popping the caps with a church key on the fridge. He handed one to Kirby.

"Thanks."

"Food should be here soon. So how does a Sheriff get an entire weekend off?"

Kirby grinned. "When my secretary tells me—or anyone else—what to do, we snap to it. I might be Sheriff, but Nancy runs the place."

"I see," Merry said, smiling—but it was a weak smile, and he seemed annoyed again.

At a lost as to what he did, Kirby continued awkwardly, "Her brother was on the police force 'til he died of a heart attack three years back, and her husband works for the mayor. She's used to being in charge, and she's kind of looked out for me since my folks died."

"I see," Merry said again, and this time his smile was brighter. "So how were you planning to spend your weekend, before you got stuck bringing Kerry's old junk to me?"

"I didn't really have plans. If anything, I would have mucked around with my wards and all. I don't get to play with magic much; even on the job it's just the same handful of spells."

Merry nodded in understanding. "Tell me about it. I'm booked with clothes to make clear through the next three months. By the time I get home, I'm too tired to do anything I want to do."

"Yeah, that' about the size of it," Kirby said, not bothering to add that as sick as he was of doing nothing but working and sleeping, it was still better than finding himself with free time that would drive him crazy because he just wasn't good at being alone—even if that was all he'd been for too many years.

But...there was something Merry's eyes, that seemed to say he understood perfectly what Kirby had left unsaid. Kirby shifted, and the silence seemed suddenly weighted. Merry set his beer down on the table and moved forward a step. "Kirby—"

"Yeah?" Kirby asked softly.

Merry hesitated another moment, seeming to deliberate, then finally said in an equally quiet voice, "Stay here the weekend."

"I'd like that," Kirby replied, heart threatening to thud right out of his chest. He wished he could think of something else to say, but the silence and the smiling seemed enough for the moment, really.

A knock at the door finally broke the spell, and Merry seemed to move reluctantly away to answer the door.

Kirby finished his beer and grabbed another from the fridge. His stomach growled as Merry returned and the smell of food struck him. Steak, potatoes, veggies. Oh, yes.

Merry smiled a slow, hot little smirk just rich with private amusement, but he didn't say a word as he set the food out. "A friend of mine owns a steakhouse about two miles from here. He's willing to hook me up occasionally for the clothes I make him, and the custom uniforms I make for his wait staff."

"That's a good friend to have," Kirby replied, stomach growling again as he sat down. "Thanks."

Nodding, Merry dug into his own food, and conversation lapsed as they settled to demolishing food and knocking back beer.

"Best meal I've had in an age," Kirby said when he simply could not eat another bite. "Thanks again."

"Sure," Merry said. "Was there anything—" He broke off as his phone started ringing, and sighed as he looked at the number. "This will be fun," he muttered, rolling his eyes as he hit the accept. "Hey, Jen. No—calm—you did what—that's imported silk, do you know what it cost, I told you—goddamn it." He pinched the bridge of his nose and heaved a long sigh. "Take it off, leave it the fuck alone. I'll be there to fix it." He ended the call then, and threw his phone down in disgust. "Why do people always do what I explicitly tell them not to do?"

"Because they think you only say that sort of thing for your health and happiness," Kirby said, sympathizing. "It's like talking to a wall, except sometimes I think the walls listen better."

Merry laughed. "Pretty much. I'm afraid I'll have to bail on you, there's a diva suffering a crisis of clothing. But, make yourself at home. Maybe we can do something tomorrow?"

"Sure," Kirby said. "Uh—good luck? I have no idea what a crisis of clothing entails."

"The end of the world, apparently," Merry said. "Enjoy the rest of your night." With a wave, he scooped up his phone and was gone.

Kirby sat alone in the kitchen and finished the last of his beer, tamping down on his disappointment. Merry had said they'd do something tomorrow, he could be patient that long. He was certainly more than a little happy that there seemed to be *something* between them.

Even if it just turned out to be friendship, he'd take it. He was lucky even that was a possibility; it was hard for anyone in Midsummer to be a real friend to the Sheriff.

Standing, he cleaned up the kitchen and then wandered back down the hall to his room. He changed into his sleep pants, then walked back to the living room and the bookcase. Sitting down in front the bookcase, he began to pull books off at random, flipping through them, skimming idly until he found himself pulled more and more into the gardening spells.

He really was stuck on them, Kirby admitted with a sigh. But the challenge would be fun, and keep him from rattling around his empty house. He didn't really have time for a garden, but maybe he could start with a little window box of herbs or something.

Really, though, he should just give up the idea. What the hell would he do with herbs? He didn't cook, and he was no alchemist. He didn't have time anyway; the gardening spells would be more intensive than the wards. It was all too likely he'd get stuck working extra hours and his plants would wind up dying.

But...well, more reading wouldn't hurt anything. He was on a mini-vacation, after all. Standing, he took the book of gardening spells with him to bed, and read until he finally crashed.

He woke some time later, unable to tell what had woken him. Bright sunlight slipped through the drapes, so at the very least it was late morning. Groaning, Kirby scrubbed at his face then rolled out of bed, stumbling out into the hallway and down toward the kitchen for some water.

But as he reached the living room, he heard the sound that had probably woken him—someone trying very hard not to cry, or to at least be very quiet about it. He hesitated, then said fuck it. He'd been a goddamn mess when Randy had died, when his parents had died. He could not imagine how much worse it must be given the unhappy relationship between Merry and his twin brother.

Merry sat cross-legged in the middle of the living room, the contents of Kerry's boxes spread haphazardly around him. He held a picture in his hands, sunlight gleaming on the old beat up silver frame in which it had been placed.

Kirby picked his way through the mess, and sat down beside him, staying silent.

It was eerie, seeing Merry without all his goth stuff. He'd gotten a shower recently, his blond hair still damp, clinging to his skin, just barely resting on his shoulders. Like Kirby, he wore only pants, though his were of some slinky, shimmery black material that would have been distracting at any other time.

He really was Kerry's twin, save they'd obviously weathered the years quiet differently. Kirby had been hard, cynical, downright mean at times. The lines of his face had shown that, along with an excess of drink, bad food, and too many nights with too little sleep.

Merry's face showed sadness, weariness, but there were also laugh lines Kerry had never possessed, kindness, signs of a life much more happily lived despite the sorrows in it.

"Kerry always hated everything about me. The way I dressed, the way I acted, that I was better at magic, that I never hid we were hobgoblins. That I made more friends, more easily." He scowled at the picture

he held—two young boys, mirror images of each other, beaming at the camera with the sort of cheer only children could posses. They were sunburned, scuffed, dressed in shorts and t-shirts, wearing silly hats, obviously at an amusement park of some sort.

It twisted his gut to see they were standing in front of a merry-go-round.

Kirby slid an arm across Merry's shoulders, pulling him close. "I'm sorry."

Merry gave a bitter laugh. "He killed my best friend. I never fucking learned why. They hated each other, no matter what I did to try to make them get along. Not that Kerry liked me either. His name was Sandy. He was a wolf. Kerry poisoned him with silver. The pack was going to kill him. It took every scrap of magic I possessed, and what I could sap from Kerry, to smuggle him out and hide him in Midsummer. I saved his fucking life and cursed him so maybe he'd fucking learn something and the asshole only proved to be a complete coward in the end. He never cared about anyone but himself. He never noticed or cared—"

He bit the words off, but Kirby could fill them in. Merry had probably never wanted anything half so much as he wanted his twin brother to like him. Making soft noises of sympathy, he drew Merry into a tight embrace, ignoring for the moment his own guilt over not being quick enough to stop Kerry.

After a couple of minutes, Merry pushed away. "Sorry. I thought you'd be asleep a while longer. I shouldn't have opened the boxes. I didn't know he had this picture."

"Maybe he cared about more than himself, after all," Kirby said. "I don't think any of us ever knew what went on in his head. I'm so fucking sorry I—"

"Don't," Merry said, covering his eyes with the heel of his hands. "I told you, Sheriff. There's no need to be sorry. Kerry was Kerry. Stop feeling guilty." He drew his hands away and looked up at Kirby. "Please."

Kirby looked at him, then finally gave a slow nod. "All right."

Merry nodded, then abruptly stood up. "You can go back to bed if you like."

"Nah," Kirby said. "Once I'm up, I'm up. Should we look into breakfast?"

Smiling faintly, Merry said, "More like brunch, but I'm up for it. There's a place at the end of the street that's perfect." He moved to the doorway, then paused and looked back over his shoulder, half turning. "What colors are you wearing today?"

"Huh?" Kirby asked. "Um—I have no idea. I brought green, black, and uh, blue?"

Merry laughed. "What color blue?"

"Uh. I guess about the color of that pillow," Kirby said, pointing to one of the throw pillows. "Maybe a little darker."

"I can work with that," Merry said and vanished.

Kirby stared after him, blinking with confusion. Slowly he stood up, stretching and yawning, then wandered back down the hall to his own room. He supposed he was wearing the blue button down.

Half an hour later it became his favorite shirt when Merry reappeared dressed to match. His pants were a dark, smoky, faintly shimmery gray, decorated with buckles and chains. The blue of his shirt matched Kirby's exactly, though it was a long-sleeved t-shirt with strips of silver running down the outside of the sleeves. Even his lipstick was the right shade of blue, set off by blue-black mascara and silver and blue eye shadow. Little silver moons and stars dangled from his ears, and his hair for once was pulled back in a braid, tied off with a dark blue ribbon.

He really could not be more beautiful, but Kirby suspected he'd think that no matter what Merry wore or didn't wear.

Then Merry smirked, and Kirby flushed hot as realization dawned. "You've been messing with me!"

Merry burst out laughing, then smirked again. "Merely testing the waters, Sheriff." He picked up his phone, keys, and wallet where they'd been discarded on the couch. "Shall we go to breakfast?"

"Surely," Kirby drawled, not certain what else to say for the moment—but he thought that if was the waters being tested, then maybe, just maybe, Merry was thinking the water felt fine. Shrugging into his jacket, he slid his Stetson on his head and followed Merry out of the house.

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"Thanks for the weekend," Kirby said.

"Thanks for coming," Merry replied, shoving back an errant strand of hair as he stood on the sidewalk alongside Kirby's car.

Kirby nodded and tossed his duffel into the passenger seat, wishing he could stay, could at least drag the leaving out. The past three days had been the most fun he'd had in longer than he could remember.

If only he could figure out how to ask when they could see each other again, or if he could call—hell, this shit was hard. He *really* wanted to know exactly where this all was going, but he wasn't going to jeopardize it by being impatient. He could take it slow.

"Give me a call sometime," Merry said, answering one question, anyway. "You've got my numbers."

"Yeah," Kirby replied. "Do you have mine?"

"Only the office, I think," Merry said, smiling in that slow way of his that was rapidly driving Kirby crazy. "You could give me the others."

Snorting in amusement, Kirby got his wallet and fished out one of his business cards, then scrounged a pen from his car and wrote his cell and home numbers on the back of it. "Call whenever, hobgoblin. I'll answer if I'm able."

Merry nodded and tucked the card away in his swishy red pants. "When do you next get time off?"

"Hell if I know," Kirby said. "I'll be lucky if the town is still standing when I get home tonight. But when I figure it out, I'll let you know?"

"Okay," Merry said. "Have a good trip back."

Kirby nodded, hat dipping low, and turned away with a last thank you before he did something impulsive and stupid.

"Oh, Sheriff—"

Kirby turned back around, and abruptly found himself with an armful of slender, slinky, strawberry-scented goth, a lipstick mouth sliding across his in a hell of a fucking kiss. He wasn't going to be able to get any real work done for days.

Merry drew back after a bit, face a mess from the ruined lipstick, and Kirby figured he must be wearing at least half of it himself now, but he really didn't care. "See you, Sheriff."

Grinning, Kirby dipped his hat again. "Surely. Later, hobgoblin." Still beaming, he slid behind the wheel of his mustang and drove off with a parting wave.

He didn't get around to cleaning the lipstick from his face until after he'd settled on the highway a half hour later.

At some point, he realized, he'd started singing along with the radio. Shaking his head at himself, he kept singing anyway. He drove for three hours, until food and restroom forced his hand. Pulling into the parking lot of the first half-decent diner he found, he pulled out his phone to tell Nancy he was six hours out.

He stopped short to see he had a text. No one ever texted him. Flipping it open, he accessed the text and read *Put something in your bag. Take care of it.*

Kirby immediately reached out for his duffel, wondering when in the hell Merry had gotten the chance to get sneaky, and almost immediately found the 'something'—the book of gardening spells he'd been loath to stop reading.

Smiling, he turned back to his phone and punched in a reply. Probably grinning like an idiot, but not caring, he slid out of the car and strode to the diner, and only realized as he sat down that he'd completely forgotten to call Nancy.

Pulling his phone out again, he punched the speed dial for Nancy's house. It rang until it finally flipped to voicemail, and he left her a message saying he should be in first thing Monday and he hoped she did well at Sunday Bingo.

Hanging up, he checked to see—sure enough. Grinning, he opened the text and read *Starting my own garden tomorrow*. *Shall we make it a competition? What should we grow?*

Kirby's brows went up. A competition was it? Did he really have time—oh, screw it. Was thinking to start with herbs.

Little box garden? All right. Gotta go.

Have a good day.

Closing his phone, Kirby put it away, still smiling when a waitress finally appeared to take his order. He put in an order for the meatloaf sandwich and coffee, then tried to hold still and not bounce all over the place. He was too full of energy, though, and he just could not seem to stop smiling. Three cups of coffee didn't help matters, but he was a lost cause anyway, so what did it really matter?

When he finally got back on the road, he tried to shift his mind back into Sheriff mode. Four days away meant four days of work to get caught up on. He already felt like sighing, even if he did miss his home and his job.

There'd be paperwork to do, piles and piles of the dratted stuff. No doubt the Wither boys had managed to destroy something without him dogging their heels. And, he realized, they'd just be starting to put together everything for the New Year's Eve party that was only a month and a half away now. It was the biggest celebration in town. Most of the normal holidays just didn't mean as much in the paranormal world.

Lord, he wondered what the women were doing for the raffle prizes this year. They got scary creative some years.

He jumped when his phone started ringing, and slowed down a bit as he dug it out, opening it without bothering to check the caller ID. "This is Kirby."

"Hey."

Kirby broke into a wide smile. "Hey. What's up?"

"Almost home?" Merry asked.

"Yeah, 'bought two hours to go now. How's work?"

"Fine. I've got to do this period costume for a woman, Victorian era. It's going to be a bitch, and take me ages, but it'll be interesting."

"I'm not even certain what that entails," Kirby said with a laugh. "Sounds like a challenge thought. I'm fairly certain I'll be spending my night knocking around the Wither boys and dealing with the town drunks. They all get out of hand if I don't scare a bit of sense into them every other day."

"I certainly do not envy you that job," Merry said.

Kirby laughed again. "No one ever does. But, I can't even thread a needle, so I guess it works out."

Merry laughed, and they fell then into a silence that was somehow comfortable instead of awkward.

A sudden idea came to him, then, and he wondered he hadn't thought of it sooner—then again, when Merry was in the room, he had a hard time thinking period. "Hey, Merry, I was wondering..."

"Yeah?" Merry asked.

"Uh—we always throw a huge New Year's thing, with dancing and raffles and games, all of it. It ain't much, I'm sure, but—uh—would you like to go with me?"

There was a moment of silence, but just as Kirby was about to give himself a small heart attack, Merry said, "I'd love to."

Kirby let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Cool. Uh, I'll have Nancy keep you in the loop about it all. She'll probably nag you to death about buying raffle tickets, but don't pay her any mind."

Merry laughed. "It won't kill me to buy a few. I—" he stopped as a flood of voices suddenly drowned him out. Then he sighed softly and said, "Looks like I've got to go. Um. Take care, Sheriff. I'll talk to you later."

"You too, hobgoblin," Kirby said, sulking a bit as he hung up, but right back to being restless and almost bouncy that Merry had called for no particular reason at all.

And, he thought, turning the radio up, he had a date.

Thinking about that made the last two hours fly right on by. He really could not wait to fall into bed after all this driving. As restless as he was, he could already feel he'd be crashing soon.

Driving home took him past Ferdy's house, and Kirby pulled into Ferdy's drive last minute, seized by a sudden thought. He'd barely parked and climbed out of the car when Ferdy came from the back yard, his eyes all for the mustang. "Hey, Sheriff. How is she? Is anything wrong? They said you were out of town, did she give you trouble on the trip?"

Kirby laughed and tossed Ferdy the keys. "Nah. She runs like a dream, Ferdy. I came about something else, but poke around if you're inclined." He turned his head as movement caught the corner of his eye, and nodded in greeting to Brayton.

"Sheriff," Brayton greeted, after a moment of surprise—probably from seeing Kirby out of uniform and with a car other than his cruiser. It always threw people the first time. "Sweet ride, Sheriff."

"Thanks."

"Something up?" Brayton asked, coming to join them in the yard. He smiled fondly at Ferdy, who was half-buried in the mustang's engine.

"Not really," Kirby replied. "It's only—this is sort of about Kerry."

Even Ferdy paused at that, looking up from Kirby's car to regard him warily. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Kirby said, dipping his hat, feeling suddenly awkward for no good reason. "It's only—I've recently met his brother—his twin brother."

"Oh," Ferdy said. "People have been saying someone came to collect Kerry's ashes, but Nancy won't budge on the details, at least according to Mrs. Holly."

Kirby smiled ruefully and shook his head. "His name is Merry; he's Kerry twin but looks is about all they have in common, and even that's pretty slim. They're like night and day. But, he may be coming around here, and I didn't want you to see him and think you were seeing a ghost, or something. Kerry was shitty to a lot of folks, but you especially."

Ferdy shrugged, and smiled reassuringly. "Thanks? I should be fine. Um. I'm glad he's not Kerry? I can't picture Kerry with a twin. He never talked about his family."

"I can tell you they didn't get along, since you can figure that much out for yourself, but the rest ain't really my place to talk about."

"No, I understand," Ferdy said. "It just, uh, will be really weird the first few times I see him."

Kirby smiled, images of Merry bright and sharp in his mind. "Trust me, you'd never mistake one for the other."

"So why's he going to be coming around a lot?"

"Uh—we're getting to be friendly," Kirby said.

Brayton snorted. "Please. I think the good ol' Sheriff might be sweet on this Merry, or I'm a cat."

Kirby started to give a proper retort to that, but Ferdy burst out laughing, managing a strangled "meow" before losing it completely. Kirby grinned, and decided it was time to take his leave, given the way Brayton was looking at Ferdy.

Taking his keys back from Ferdy, he slammed the hood shut and then climbed back into his car, pulling out of the drive as Brayton got hold of Ferdy.

It took him a few more minutes to get home, and his car properly tucked away again. He pulled out his phone and texted Merry *Home. Crashing. Talk Later?* then he grabbed his bag and trudged into the house. Toeing off his shoes and dumping everything else on the table, he hung his hat up and left his bag where it was.

He stayed awake just long enough to get a reply from Merry, then fell into bed smiling.

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He could feel the eyes on him, even if every time he looked, people were very careful to look like they were working. It was driving him crazy. Narrowing his eyes at the lot of them, Kirby finally went back to

brushing snow off his clothes, knocking it off his hat. He glanced toward Nancy, and stopped short to see she wasn't at her desk. It was half past five, where the devil was she? "Where's Nancy?"

"She went across the street to Mary's to get hot chocolate," Ted said, then added reassuringly, "I'm sure she'll bring some back for you, Sheriff."

Kirby rolled his eyes. "Never mind that. You and some of the boys skedaddle over to the community center. The Wither boys have been worse than ever lately, and I'm not in the mood to have to ruin the party to arrest them for god only knows what.

"Yes, Sheriff," Ted said, and bolted off, dragging a handful of other loitering officers with him.

Silence fell with their departure, and Kirby sighed, savoring it.

"Oh, yeah, Sheriff—" Ted popped back in, and grinned. "Mama said to tell you she bought ten raffle tickets for the grand prize."

Kirby turned red. "Get!"

Ted got.

Groaning, still mortified a month and a half later by the stupid raffle, he stomped into his office and dropped down into his chair. He didn't know whose hare-brained idea it had been to raffle off eligible bachelors, but he was going to strangle every last one of them.

Especially since he wasn't exactly a bachelor anymore, even if Merry found the entire thing far too hilarious.

Kirby scowled at the mess of paperwork on his desk. He really should be doing it right now. He never should have let it fall so far behind. But between work, the added craziness that always cropped up this time of year, the party, the weather, and all his spare time split between Merry and sleep—most of it going to Merry—there just wasn't enough hours in the day anymore for paperwork.

Honestly, he was surprised there wasn't more paperwork burying his poor desk. Sighing, he began to pick through it, looking for the easiest bits to knock out, wondering how long he'd have to work before he could sneak off to get ready for the party.

That immediately made him think of Merry again—like he ever stopped, Kirby thought, rolling his eyes at himself. Merry was supposed to show up around seven, which was still entirely too far away, but at least it was a lot closer than it had been.

A month and a half since they'd last seen each other, that weekend he'd hauled Kerry's stuff down. Just an hour and a half, now, and he'd see Merry again. They'd talked, and texted, and emailed while they competed over spelled herb gardens

Nancy's phone rang out in the main room, jarring him from his thoughts, and Kirby climbed to his feet with a grimace. He hated answering Nancy's phone. He preferred his phone, where he never got calls that had not first been run through the Nancy filter.

He'd just reached his door, though, when someone else answered Nancy's phone. Kirby started to turn back into his office, when the officer, Dickey, held the phone out, grinning ear to ear. "Sheriff, your sweetheart's on the phone."

Kirby stalked over and snatched the phone from him, glaring until Dickey fled to the other side of the room. Then he put the phone to his ear, and pointedly turned his back to the room before he smiled and said, "Hey."

"Hey," Merry said, laughter in his voice, which meant he'd heard the damned 'sweetheart' crack and really, Kirby was going to knock some heads together after he hung up. "Just called to say I hit some heavy snow, so I probably won't be there 'til closer to eight. Sounds like things are a bit, uh, crazy there."

"Yeah, and the discipline is obviously slipping," Kirby replied, turning to glare as snickering erupted from the far side of the room. "That will be rectified shortly."

Merry laughed. "I'll let you go then. But Sheriff..." his voice turned a bit husky. "Don't wear yourself out administering discipline. I don't want you exhausted when I get there."

Then he was gone, leaving Kirby flushed and hot, the back of his neck burning and any hope of getting paperwork done gone forever.

The snickering on the far side of the room erupted into full out gales of laughter. Kirby whipped around, and jabbed a finger in their direction. "You lot clearly don't have enough to do these days, if all you can find to keep you occupied is harassing me. I don't know why you suddenly started in—"

"Weren't nothing to tease you about before," cut in one officer. "Now, there's plenty, and you're too busy talking to your sweetheart to follow through on threats to kill us." His words sent the others to laughing all over again, and making jokes and statements of their own.

Kirby threw his hands up in defeat. "Go earn your paychecks, you miscreants, or I'll find you something to do and I promise you won't like it."

"Yes, Sheriff," they all said, and scrambled—nearly knocking Nancy over in their haste to get out the door.

Making a face at them, Kirby went to help Nancy. "Thanks," he said when she handed him one of the hot chocolates she'd brought back. "You want to explain to me why my staff has gone loco?"

Nancy snorted. "Took you this long to notice, honey? But they're just happy to see you happy—and amused as hell to see you acting like a normal person. You've been more approachable lately, what with the phone calls from Merry, hiding in your office texting when you should be doing paperwork, and actually taking lunches and going home at reasonable hours. Being lovestruck is good for you."

Kirby flushed, and muttered something about nosy small towns into his hot chocolate.

Snickering, Nancy fondly patted his cheek then strode to her desk. "Are you ready to be raffled off, Sheriff?"

"No," Kirby said sourly. "How exactly did I get roped into this nonsense? And I'm not exactly a bachelor, anymore, you know." Not that he and Merry had said anything explicit, and they'd only sort of known each other two months—but hell, he had no interest in looking elsewhere. Until Merry, he hadn't been interested in looking at all.

"I know, honey," Nancy said, sorting through the tidy piles on her desk and putting it all into new piles. "But that didn't change until too late. It's not like your man minds; it's good he's got that sense of humor. Mercy knows his brother didn't know the meaning of humor. He even bought quite a few raffle tickets himself."

"I told you not to harass him about those," Kirby said.

Nancy lifted her eyes to the ceiling. "I didn't. He asked how much, and I told him, and he bought a few." She smirked.

Kirby narrowed his eyes. "How many is a few?"

"A few is a few," Nancy said primly. "Now, as I can see your mind is on your man and not your work, and work can wait 'til Monday anyway, I think if you wanted to sneak off early that you could."

"Never let it be said I don't know when to follow orders," Kirby said. "I guess I'll see you there tonight."

Nancy nodded absently, murmuring an automatic reply, already immersed in her work.

Smiling, Kirby left, sipping his hot chocolate on the way home. Once there, he first checked on his little box herb garden, which had taken over his kitchen table and seemed to be doing well. If his spells held, then in a couple more weeks he'd see if they could withstand the freezing cold outside like they should, and there were a half dozen other spells woven into them as well, to be tested as they went along.

He really couldn't wait for Merry to arrive, so they could compare their gardens side by side instead of simply through emailed photos.

Grinning, too excited to continue holding still, he bolted up the stairs to his bedroom. He'd spent the previous night cleaning the house, and had done all the little, last minute things that morning before heading off to work.

Turning on the shower, he left it to warm up while he stripped and got out his clothes for the evening. Nothing fancy, just his good dark jeans, a brand new black sweater, and he'd polished his good boots and brushed off his hat. He really hoped he passed muster. He couldn't wait to see what Merry would be wearing. Shaking his head at himself, he climbed into the shower and scrubbed himself down good, shaving and hoping his stupid curly hair would behave tonight instead of going every which way like he didn't know how to use a comb.

Clean, he clambered out of the shower and got dressed, fought and lost a battle to his hair, and finished everything off with a bit of cologne and his amulet.

Downstairs, he put on his boots and shrugged into his good leather jacket. Gathering up his things and stuffing it all into the appropriate pockets, he put his hat on his head and locked up his house, then walked the seven blocks to the community center, grateful that despite the weather, they'd managed to get the sidewalks and roads clear for all the people coming and going tonight.

He took his coat and hat off at the door, handing them over to little Betty, then nodded hello to the handful of people working the front. "Howdy."

"Sheriff."

"Hey, Sheriff."

"Good evening, Sheriff."

"So, Sheriff, your man is showing up about seven-thirty or so, right?"

Kirby snorted in amusement. "Yeah, Mason. 'Round about that."

"We'll keep an eye out for him," said the woman sitting next to Mason. "What's he look like?"

Kirby only smiled. "You'll know him. He stands out in a crowd."

"Is it true he's Kerry's twin, Sheriff?"

"Yeah," Kirby replied. "You'd best see no one holds that against him, or he'll be dealing with me."

"No worries, Sheriff," Mason said, and the others all hastily added their own assurances. "Nobody'd cross you, no matter who he is."

Kirby nodded. "So where do I find the beer, and who needs to be scowled at?"

One of the women laughed. "Beers at those blue tables, Sheriff. Don't think anyone has stepped out of line, yet. Your boys scared off them Wither boys for the time being. But if you want to make a couple of circuits, I'm sure you'll scare or distract any pending mischief." She winked. "I bought five tickets."

Groaning, which only set everyone to laughing, Kirby fled to the beverage tables. "Beer, Shelly, please."

"Sure, Sheriff. I've got seven tickets, myself," she said, snickering.

"Not you too!" Kirby complained. "I know this whole town has been gossiping about me and Merry, so why am I getting harassed about the raffle?"

"His name is Merry?" Shelly asked. "Ha! Wait until I tell Mrs. Holly I know and she don't."

Kirby fled for the sake of his sanity, running for the corner where he spied Ferdy with Brayton, Low, and Peter.

Peter smiled sympathetically. "I think they're harassing you worse now than they did back during that one Halloween."

"Ugh, tell me about it," Kirby said, heaving a sigh. He and Randy had caught hell that night, between Randy dressing like a gothic princess and their making out in the old clock tower 'til Mrs. Holly had caught them and screeched about it to everyone.

Gods have mercy, people were going to flip when they saw Merry—though they wouldn't flip half so hard as him, and not at all for the same reason.

"Sheriff?"

"Huh?" Kirby said, realizing they were all looking at him. "Sorry. What?"

The four men laughed. "We said, what does Merry think of the raffle?"

"He thinks it's funny," Kirby said, and took a long pull of his beer. "Maybe he'll win it and I'll be off the hook."

Ferdy laughed and pointed. "Well, you're not off the hook yet. Here comes Leslie, and I think she's wanting you to start the dancing with her."

Stifling a sigh, Kirby finished his beer and handed the empty bottle off to Ferdy with a thanks. Turning, he went through the motions and small talk with Leslie before agreeably leading her out to the dance floor and calling for Joe to get the music started.

After that, the party got into full swing. People crowded the dance floor—and he was scarcely allowed to leave it—milling around the food and beverage tables, clustering around the edges of the dance floor, trickling outside to play the various games set up across a well lit and heavily spelled field, couples sneaking off to have fun in the upstairs rooms.

Minus a couple of incidents he stopped before they could turn into real trouble, the evening proceeded along very well. He was, however, painfully aware of every passing minute. The closer it got to eight, the harder and faster his heart pounded, and he had to keep wiping his sweaty palms on his jeans. When his phone suddenly vibrated in his pocket, he couldn't pull it out fast enough.

He noticed the sudden silence in the room just as he read *You look good in that sweater*.

Kirby jerked his head up and whipped around to face the main doors, only barely noting he wasn't the only one staring. Then he forgot anyone else was in the room.

As hard as he tried, he never quite managed to remember how gut-wrenchingly beautiful Merry was, and how amazingly he pulled off his goth look.

Merry's shirt was, of all things, white. Ostensibly it was an oxford-style shirt, but it was shorter, tighter, and made of something shimmery, the cuffs and collar edged with short black lace. It hugged him fine, just fine indeed, same as the leather pants. He was never going to survive Merry making his own clothes, and making them to fit *well*.

All his make-up was black, even his nails, with hints of silver in the eye shadow. All his jewelry was onyx and diamonds. His hair was something else again, brushed straighter than Kirby had ever seen it, soft looking as hell. He wanted to sink his hands into it and mess it up dragging Merry close to kiss him until they were both senseless.

"Kirby," Merry greeted, smiling warmly as Kirby reached him.

"Howdy," Kirby said, fingers twitching with an urge to touch, though he managed to behave. "I'm happy you made it."

"Me too," Merry replied.

Kirby extended a hand. "Come on, we'll get you something to eat or drink."

"I would definitely love a beer," Merry replied. "How's the party? How long will it take them to stop staring at me?"

"That won't ever stop," Kirby said with a grin.

"Hi," Shelly said breathlessly as they reached the table, preventing any reply Merry might have made. "You must be Merry, the rumors are true, you are his twin, but oh man, Kerry dressed nothing like you, honey."

"Shelly," Kirby said sharply. "Could we get two beers?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure, Sheriff," Sherry said, quick to obey the Sheriff tone.

Merry laughed and tilted his head up, teasing and challenging. "So do I get a welcome kiss, Sheriff?"

Kirby drew a sharp breath. Man, he really wished they were anywhere but at the part, surrounded by people. "I didn't want to mess up your make-up," he said. "You really look good, but you just know that."

Merry smiled, amused and thoughtful all at once as he looked up at Kirby. "No one's ever stared quite as hard as you. I like it."

"What, like a small town yokel half gone on 'shine?" Kirby asked with a laugh. "You do kick like a mule, though."

Of all things, Merry's cheeks went pink, but he only kept smiling. "So where's my kiss?"

Smiling, Kirby bent and placed a too-brief kiss on the corner of Merry's mouth, fervently wishing for the party to hurry up and end so he could do the sorts of things that would ruin Merry's make-up beyond all hope of repair.

"How's things been?" Kirby asked as he drew back, though he knew that Merry had been busy with the holiday season, and that people had bugged him to go to other parties, until Merry had put his foot down loudly and clearly.

"I'm glad to get away for a few days," Merry replied. "Thank you," he said as Shelly brought his beer.

Kirby then guided him across the room to where Peter and the others had returned to their corner. "A few days?" he asked, excited. "I didn't know you had more than today and tomorrow."

"Um—" Merry looked embarrassed and uncertain suddenly. "I took the whole week. Is that okay, I don't have to stay—"

"It's perfect," Kirby said, then motioned to the guys as he reached them. "This is Peter, he's the local paranormal doc. That's his mate, Lowell, alpha of the Midsummer pack. Brayton just joined the pack recently, he's now our resident jack of all trades, you could say. Ferdy there is his mate, and he's our local gremlin. Guys, this is Merry Greyling."

Peter looked amused as he shook Merry's hand. "You are certainly quite the sight to behold. No wonder you snared our Sheriff so hard and fast."

Merry laughed and slid Kirby a look.

Kirby scowled at Peter. "I got things I could be telling your pup, doc, so watch yourself."

Peter snickered and held up his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright. Look sharp, you've got Mrs. Holly coming up behind you and closing fast."

"Shit," Kirby muttered and grabbed Merry's hand, darting through his friends and out one of the back doors, not at all above running like a coward if it meant avoiding Mrs. Holly.

"What—" Merry bumped into him when Kirby abruptly stopped. "Why are we running?"

"Cause otherwise Mrs. Holly will catch us, and even the good lord is scared of that woman," Kirby replied. He slowly let go of the hand he was still holding, but only so he could give into temptation and run a hand through Merry's hair—letting out a silent sigh of relief when Merry did not protest. "And to be perfectly honest, I'd rather have you to myself."

Merry smiled in a way that could only be described as smoldering. "I certainly didn't dress this way so you wouldn't want to touch me."

Kirby made a strangled noise and pulled him a bit closer, unable to resist doing more touching, petting. "How am I lucky enough to have a chance with you?"

"I could ask myself the same question," Merry said, voice a bit breathless as he did some touching of his own, making Kirby hiss. "Given what Kerry did to people around here, given what I did to him...I didn't think you'd want anything to do with me. It was the shock of my life, being told there was a cowboy to see me."

"I figured you must hate me, or at least not care a whit one way or the other, for..." but he was loathe to mention more directly the matter of Kerry and how he'd die.

Merry shook his head. "I guess we're both lucky, Sheriff. As charming as this party is, how soon can we go somewhere you're able to ruin my make-up?"

Kirby shuddered, voice definitely hoarse and a little bit growly when he replied, "Not soon enough."

"That's too bad," Merry murmured. "I don't think I said, but you look damned fine yourself. It's no wonder so many tickets sold, to have a date with you."

"I really hate that raffle," Kirby groused, not caring if he was whining.

Merry laughed and reached up to lap carefully at Kirby's lips. "Like I said, can't blame them. I bought a hundred tickets myself."

Kirby choked. "A—why in the heck did you do that?"

"It was a good cause, and I wanted to win a date with the Sheriff," Merry said, laughing.

"Like you need a raffle to get a date," Kirby said with an amused snort. "You could have any date you wanted, hobgoblin, and just for the asking."

Merry smiled. "I like this one."

Kirby smiled back. "it's not much so far, hiding out here."

A hand ghosted over his face and Merry murmured, "No complaints from me."

"You'd best stop teasing, hobgoblin, or I'll be in a world of hurt for skipping out—" His words were drowned out as Ms. Pearson's strident voice came over the loudspeaker, announcing the raffle drawings were about to start and everyone should return to the main room.

Kirby groaned and reluctantly led Merry back inside, squeezing his hand before finally letting go and dragging himself to the stage at the far end of the room.

"Hey there, Sheriff," Ms. Pearson said with a grin. "All set?"

"If I said no, could we call it off?" Kirby asked with a teasing smile, pitching his voice so the crowd could hear him and laugh.

"No such luck," Ms. Pearson said briskly, then turned to the microphone. "All right, everyone, let's get this started. We've got a host of wonderful prizes tonight, including a car fixed up right by our man Ferdy, free meals for a week from Mary, and of course a date with our favorite Sheriff! Y'all know how this is done, so let's get to it."

Kirby waited patiently as the other prizes were slowly called and handed out, more than once seeking Merry out in the crowd, stifling a sympathetic laugh as he saw nearly everyone harassing him at some

point. But Merry only smiled and dealt with each nosy person, though Kirby saw he looked completely puzzled more than once, and even a bit worried.

But then Ms. Pearson drew his attention back as she announced, "All right, everyone. Lots of money was raised this year, and most of it I must admit was given on the chance for a night out with Sheriff Kirby. We oughta make him a regular thing, what say?"

The room filled with laughing and cheering, good-natured ribbing.

"I don't think so," Kirby hollered back, just making them laugh harder.

"Hmm," Ms. Pearson said playfully. "I suppose it's true his pretty new boyfriend might take issue."

Kirby flushed, bright and hot, but he didn't refute the statement—and took the laughter that rose up yet again. He just hoped Merry didn't mind.

But then Merry's voice rang out, "Yes, I'm afraid the new boyfriend would take issue."

The crowd parted a bit around Merry, laughing still harder, until Ms. Pearson finally got them to settle down enough to continue with the drawing. "All right, here we go. The lucky winner is whoever's holding ticket number 304493."

"That would be me," Merry said, no small amount of satisfaction as he held up an impressive bundle of tickets. "Mine are 401-500." He strode to the stage and gave his tickets to Ms. Pearson, then turned to Kirby.

Ms. Pearson laughed. "I guess the rumors of a hundred tickets were true."

"What can I say?" Merry asked. "I'm impressed by your local law enforcement." He snagged the front of Kirby's sweater and yanked him closer. "Very impressed."

Kirby flushed again, and ushered Merry off the stage as everyone erupted into laughter and ribald teasing. Ducking out the first exit, he dragged Merry away from the community center and into the street, deciding he could go back for his things tomorrow. No way was he going back in there, not after that.

Merry only laughed—then pushed him up against the wall of Merrill's hardware store, pinning him there. "So, Sheriff, are you free the rest of the night?"

"Yeah," Kirby said, barely getting the word out before Merry put an end to his own lipstick.

"Mmph—" was about as far as Kirby managed before he gave up talking entirely and simply gave as he good as he got. He sank one hand into Merry's soft, soft hair, and got a handful of Merry's fine ass with the other, tugging until Merry was straddling his thigh, Merry's cock rubbing against his leg.

Merry's hand were almost painfully tight in his hair, but Kirby loved it. He wanted more and he wanted it now.

Tearing away, he managed to say, "My place."

With a groan, Merry took a step back and said, "Where is it from here?"

"Seven blocks that way," Kirby said, pointing. "I walked here."

"My car," Merry said, and dragged him to where he'd parked.

They drove off, and Kirby swore seven blocks had never taken so damned long in his life. When they finally reached his house, he only barely had the patience to wait for Merry to secure his car, deactivating his own wards on the way. Inside, he closed the door, locked it, then dragged Merry upstairs only because he didn't want to have to move there later.

He half-sat, half-fell upon his bed, and dragged Merry with him, pushing him into the blankets and rolling on top of him. Then he simply went for it, greedily attacking Merry's mouth, pushing at fabric, fighting with buttons, until at last his fingers slid over smooth, warm skin.

Merry certainly wasn't protesting, spreading eagerly for him, hands pushing up under Kirby's sweater, exploring skin of their own. Kirby pulled back and stripped off his sweater, then finished undoing all the evil little buttons of Merry's shirt. "I really hope," he said, getting the word out between biting little kisses to Merry's torso, "that this wasn't' one of your thousand dollar outfits."

Chuckling, Merry dragged him up for a proper kiss. "Whatever it costs, it's worth the loss."

Kirby kissed him again, then attacked Merry's throat, loving the soft skin, breathing in that strawberry-lemon scent. "You always smell like summer." He moved down from Merry's throat to his chest, nipping and sucking, making Merry writhe and plead and Christ was he even prettier when he was begging Kirby to do dirty thing.

Muttering an oath when he reached the leather pants, Kirby drew back again. "I have no idea how to get these pants off you. They damn near even *feel* painted on."

"Getting them on takes a bit of effort," Merry said with a laugh, and pushed at him, rolling away to slowly peel the pants off.

Kirby watched in fascination as he did it, finally shaking his head and dragging a naked Merry close again. "I don't know how or why you get into such tight pants."

"Very slowly, and because I wanted to look good for my date," Merry said, going easily when Kirby rolled them again, rubbing against him, splaying his hands across Kirby's chest, raking his black-painted nails down it.

Kirby kissed him again, and reached a hand between them to finally take hold of Merry's cock. "You've been driving me crazy since we met."

"The feeling is mutual," Merry got out, voice a bit strangled, body moving, hips thrusting, encouraging the knowing strokes of Kirby's hand. "If you don't fuck me soon, I will go crazy."

Laughing, Kirby let go of his cock. "Can't have that." He moved his fingers back, moaning when he found what he sought—and groaning loud and long when he found Merry already slick, ready and waiting. It was the hottest fucking thing he'd encountered since college. "You—" he gave up and only groaned again.

Merry laughed, ragged and husky. "I'm glad you approve."

Kirby kissed him, hard and deep and rough, wanting Merry to still be feeling the kiss hours later. Then he pulled away and lined up his cock, pushing in slowly, moaning at the tightness, the heat. He paused to breathe after he was all the way, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to Merry's shoulder.

"Come on, Sheriff," Merry said. "Show me what you've got."

"Surely," Kirby replied, and started to move, gripping Merry's hips, thrusting slow and deep at first, teasing them both, drawing it out. But Merry spread out on his bed, hands clinging to the headboard, make-up and hair a mess, skin flushed and sweaty—

His control snapped, thrusts turning quick and hard, grip tightening, and he was determined to leave Merry feeling it for days, pushing and pushing until he finally came hard, burying his head in Merry's throat, biting it, shuddering as Merry came between them.

He stirred several minutes later, soothing the mark on Merry's throat with his tongue. "Thanks for coming to see me."

Merry smiled and kissed him. "Pleasure is mine, trust me."

Kirby returned the smile, and burrowed close, and they fell into a light doze for bit. "I suppose we ought to bring your plants in," he finally said.

"Mmph," Merry said, then sat up and said more clearly, "Yeah. Shower first?" He put fingers to his face, laughing when they came away covered in ruined make-up.

"Surely," Kirby replied, and rolled out of bed, striding to his bathroom to get the shower started.

A minute later, Merry was crowding up behind him, copping a generous feel. Kirby laughed and turned, dragging him close and kissed him, managing to drag him into the shower without killing or injuring them.

Getting a shower took a lot longer than it normally would have taken, but Kirby had no complaints. When they finally clambered out, he pulled on his sleep pants, then offered another pair to Merry, when they realized that they hadn't actually bothered to get Merry's clothes out of his car.

Downstairs, he flicked on the kitchen lights and made a pot of coffee while Merry went to get his things. Then he went to see what he had in the fridge, since he was pretty certain he'd never actually given Merry a chance to eat at the party.

He was immediately distracted when he heard Merry come back, and looked up, expecting to see him in the kitchen, frowning in confusion when Merry didn't show after a couple of minutes. Abandoning the

fridge, he wandered into the hall—and drew up short to see Merry standing at the little table where he kept his pictures, holding the one of him and Randy.

Merry looked up as Kirby reached him. "Um—this is probably a stupid question, but, uh—while you were on stage, everyone kept coming up and telling me how much I resembled Randy, and how you seemed happy the way you used to with Randy—" He looked down at the picture again, then set it back in its place. "Maybe it's none of my business, but is this the Randy I've been hearing about all night?" He looked up curiously, and a bit uncertainly, at Kirby.

Kirby lightly touched Merry's face. "Yeah, that's Randy. We were friends growing up, and a lot more than friends in high school. He died in a car wreck our junior year. But, you're nothing alike, not really. Randy was a rowdy one, a troublemaker born. I can't tell you how many scrapes we got into growing up because of him." He smiled faintly at the memory, then sobered. "It's true I didn't know how much I liked your look until he dressed up that one Halloween, but he's been gone nineteen years, Merry. It ain't him I see—"

He was cut off by a kiss, and caught hold of Merry in surprise, holding fast and happily returning the kiss until Merry finally drew back. "I didn't think you were," Merry said. "I was just curious. Everyone kept mentioning him, and he sounded special."

"He was," Kirby said softly. "But you are too."

Merry smiled, and finally bent to retrieve his bag and his little herb garden. "Shall we, Sheriff? I believe I've got a competition to win."

"Whatever you say, hobgoblin," Kirby said, grinning, "but you haven't won the day quite yet."

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"You can lock them up for all I care," Kirby snapped. "I've about had it with them damn Withers boys. They want to mess around, they can finally get what's coming to them. Haul 'em in."

Ted shrank away from his desk and fled the office. Kirby picked up his coffee, realized it had gone cold, and set it down again with an impatient noise. Picking up the latest in a massive pile of paperwork, he read the papers through, made a couple of corrections, and signed off on the bottom.

A knock came at his door, and Kirby looked up, glaring at the intruder. "What?"

"Uh—Sheriff—" Ken said hesitantly. "I wondered if, uh, I could maybe take off a bit early? It's quiet and everyone else is in and—"

"Why?" Kirby asked.

"Pop needs my help out at the farm, two of his hands are sick. I told him—"

"Fine," Kirby barked, just to get rid of him.

Ken fled.

He managed to get through another twenty minute of work before someone *else* knocked on his damned door. "What n—" He sighed as he saw who it was, and moderated his tone. "Yes, Nancy?"

Nancy just gave him one of her looks and thumped a folder down on his desk, something metallic rattling inside it. "Ol' Thomas says his back is acting up something fierce today, and his boys are up Trenton way picking up some wood orders, and he wonders if you might not mind doing him a favor and going to have a looksee at Ms. Wither's old shop. Someone's looking to buy it, but it's got be inspected first. I told Thomas you'd do it. I'd have told him you'd be happy to do it, except you're such a damn grizzly bear anymore, you ain't happy about anything."

Kirby said nothing, only gave a terse nod and snatched up the folder, throwing it to one side of his desk before going back to his paperwork. "I'll get to it."

Rolling her eyes, Nancy stomped to the door. Then she stopped, and turned back to face him, legs spread, hands on hips. "When Roger gets to be all grizzly bear, you know what makes him feel better?"

"What?" Kirby asked flatly, wishing she'd just go away and leave him the hell alone. Why did people have to be so aggravating today?

"Telling me he's sorry for whatever we fought about," Nancy said tartly, then slammed his door shut so hard he swore the building shook.

Kirby wilted in his seat, all the fight knocked right out of him.

He couldn't even fucking remember what they'd been fighting about, anymore. He just knew he couldn't fucking apologize because Merry wasn't answering his damned phone, and Kirby was too chickenshit to just call the store because he didn't want to be fobbed off by one of the clerks.

Fishing his cell phone out where he'd tried to hide it away in his desk because he was sick of looking at it, he punched the speed dial for Merry. But for what had to be at least the hundredth time, it only rang until it flipped to voicemail. Snarling and cursing, only barely resisting an urge to throw it across the room, he shoved it in his pocket and snatched up his hat.

Jerking his door open, he ignored all and sundry as he stomped out of the office. Deciding against his cruiser, needing to blow off steam, he crossed the street and walked the four blocks to the south end of main street where all the fancy little shops tended to cluster—boutiques and galleries and all. Ms. Withers, before she passed, had been one hell of a painter. It had been a damned shame when she'd died, and a bigger shame her only living legacy was a couple of irascible troublemakers hell bent on tearing Midsummer down one piece at a time.

Her shop had been closed up for ages, no one needing or interested in the space. He wondered who was after it now, of a sudden. He should have asked, but he suspected if he tried now Nancy would tell him what he could do with himself, in no uncertain terms. Hell, he'd probably have to buy the whole office breakfast before she'd get off his back.

Sighing, he opened the folder and fished out the keys taped inside. His dad had worked with Ol' Thomas all their lives, fixing up buildings and houses, doing maintenance work for folks, seeing all the city

buildings were up to code. Kirby had helped them out a lot growing up, and he still pitched in whenever Thomas needed it.

Unlocking the door, he let himself inside. The building had gotten a makeover only a year or so before Ms. Withers had died, so it should be in good condition. He didn't imagine it would need work than whatever the new owner required for his own shop.

A cursory looked around seemed to prove him correct. Opening the folder again, he pulled out a pen and ticked off a few things, then began to go through the building more thoroughly. He was poking around the plumbing in the back when he heard the front door open and close. Who the hell would just walk in here? It wasn't like they knew he was in here.

Grateful to have a good reason—well, a reason anyway—to snarl at someone, he stomped back out to the front—

"Merry?"

Merry looked at him in surprise and no small amount of dismay. "Kirby? Uh. What are you doing here?"

Stung, Kirby snarled a reply. "What are you doing here is the better question. Then again, if you'd been answering your damned phone, maybe we'd have gotten to the part where you said you were coming up, except you don't seem particularly damned happy to see me so maybe I wasn't supposed to know."

"Uh—" Merry winced, and looked at the floor. "After we were done shouting at each other I, uh, threw my phone in the back room. Then when I left to come here, I thought it was in my pocket. I didn't realize until four hours later that I didn't have it."

Some of Kirby's ire and hurt went out at that, but too much still stung. "So why are you here? And why are you unhappy to see me? I know..."

"I'm not," Merry said hastily, staring hard at the floor. "I just—you were pretty mad, and I figured my 'surprise, I'm here for the next four days', might not be a *good* surprise any longer, and—"

Kirby couldn't take it. He stalked across the room and sank his hands into Merry's hair, kissing him hard, rough, too desperate to be smooth. Merry kissed back, just as desperate and eager, clinging to the front of his uniform.

"I'm sorry," Kirby finally said, tearing away. "Hell, Mer, I don't even remember what we were arguing about, but I'm sorry for it."

"Me too," Merry said, slumping against him. "I was so damned mad—and then—I finally went to get my phone cause I couldn't take it anymore, and when I realized I'd left it—"

Kirby hugged him tight, held him as tight as he could get away with it. "I am happy you're here. Hell, I think half my problem is I never get to see you even half as much as I want. Not even a tenth." He wanted to see Merry every day, and sleep next to him every night, and getting to see him maybe a few days of every month just wasn't anywhere near good enough.

But he didn't know what to say or even what to do to fix it.

"Um—about that," Merry said, suddenly looking the closest to terrified Kirby had ever seen him.

He frowned, immediately terrified Merry was about to break up with him. "What is it?"

Merry pulled away and went back to staring at the floor. "Even before I met you, I'd been thinking of moving. I'm sick of the city, and the way all my major customers are close enough they have me at their beck and call."

Kirby's heart began to beat so fast he thought it might pop.

Still speaking to the floor, Merry continued, "And I know we've only been together five months, but um—would you mind—I was thinking—"

"Honey, tell me you're thinking of moving here before I die from waiting to hear it."

Merry laughed a bit unsteadily. "Yes. I was. Is that okay?"

Kirby whooped and yanked him close again, kissing him eagerly, too ecstatic and silly-happy to be better than clumsy about it but not caring in the least. "That's the best news I've had in an age, Mer. Do you really want to come to Midsummer? I'd be willing to try anything. All I want is you—to see you every day."

He wiped a bit of smeared lipstick from Merry's face, thoroughly distracted by Merry decked out in black and purple now that he wasn't miserable from fighting.

Merry smiled and pulled out a black handkerchief from one of the many pockets of his pants, reaching up to clean Kirby's face. "I was just worried it'd be moving too fast. And small town is what I'm looking for. The city was fun when I was twenty. Hell, it wasn't so bad when I was thirty. But it's not what I'm looking for anymore." He looked almost shy as he smiled at Kirby. "Midsummer seems to have everything I want."

Kirby smiled right back. "The minute you're here to stay, Midsummer will be perfect."

Laughing, Merry reached up and kissed him again, twining his arms around Kirby's neck, pressing as close as he could possibly get when Kirby's arms wrapped around him. "So why are you here?" Merry asked eventually. "Here as in this shop? That's why I seemed upset to see you. I came here to meet the building inspector, hoping to get business out of the way before I showed up to surprise you and hope you'd still want to see me."

Snickering, Kirby said, "OI' Thomas and my dad used to be in this business together. I still help Thomas out when he needs it. He asked me to come take a look at this place."

Merry frowned. "So much for keeping it a secret until I could be certain you wanted me here."

Kirby snorted. "I've been growly and mean lately 'cause you're *not* here. I think I can safely say that everyone wants you here, or they'll have no choice but to kill me." He stole another kiss. "What say we finish looking over your store, and then you can come and inspect your new living accommodations."

Merry blinked at him, then comprehension dawned, and he smiled in that slow, hot little way of his that drove Kirby wild. "I'm pretty picky, Sheriff. I'll expect a very thorough inspection of the premises."

"That's reasonable, hobgoblin. Might take all night, though."

Laughing, Merry reached up a hand to trace Kirby's lips with his fingers. "Won't you be missed at work?"

"Nah. I told you, I've been mean lately. Besides, by now someone will have noticed your car and told the rest of the town you're here. They won't expect me 'til tomorrow," Kirby replied, then nibbled at the teasing fingers.

"Then let's get to inspecting," Merry said, and stepped back. He pulled out a small mirror and a thing of lipstick from yet another pocket, quickly and neatly restoring his dark purple lipstick.

Kirby watched him, hot and hard. "I'm only going to mess you up again, honey."

Merry tucked his things away and smirked. "That's the idea, Sheriff." Then he strode across the room to the back, ass ten kinds of distracting in the slinky pants, and he really was the most beautiful, tempting thing Kirby had ever seen—even when they did want to kill each other.

All his, Kirby thought, and it was looking like Merry was all his forever. Discarding his hat so it wouldn't get ruined in the back, and locking up the store so no one else would come to bother them, he went after Merry to get started inspecting.

Fin