



## Chapter One

THE paw print glistened in the sunlight. It was the only clear track left by the harsh wind that constantly howled between the stable's back wall and the paddock. Luckily, Usher had found it before the sunshine had melted it.

He glanced across the landscape. A path had been forged from the woods, through the deep January snow, and into the rear paddock to the barn. Usher pulled a tape measure from his coat pocket, knelt, and measured the track horizontally.

Six inches.

Frowning, he swore and stood up. He should call the game warden again, but he doubted it would do any good. With a few more weeks to go of bow season, the warden was more interested in nabbing deer poachers than investigating anything else.

If Usher didn't find the sorrel yearling that had been missing for the last three days, he'd have to contact the insurance company and report her stolen. He stared at the paw print and prayed that whatever had been making nightly visits hadn't harmed the yearling.

*The prints have claw marks, so a cat didn't make them. And if that's a wolf print then it has to be a freak of nature.* He shivered and glanced across the paddock at the encroaching woods.

The sound of a motor drew his attention. Usher stepped around the corner of the stable. Looking toward the mailbox,

he squinted against the sunshine. The postal truck pulled away from the letter box and trundled along the snow-packed dirt road.

After a week of being snowed in by a blizzard that had dumped twenty inches of snow, Usher finally heard a plow go through about three in the morning. With the mail delivery behind schedule, it took the postman some time to fill the box. Usher figured his was probably two-thirds junk and the other third bills.

He noted the snow chains on the vehicle too. *Maybe I should wait another day and give the township more time to treat the roads before driving into Stone Trail.*

He labored over the path the horses had mashed in the snow. The fence posts all wore fluffy white caps, and ice filigree laced the glass panes of the stable office. As he exited the paddock gate and made his way along the shoveled path to the mailbox, the sound of tires sliding over hardened snow drew his attention to the mail truck. Although the postal carrier fought to keep the vehicle on the road, it slid closer to the edge, pitched into the culvert and toppled over at an angle. With its right side pinned against three fence posts, the wheels on the driver's side spun in midair.

Usher burst through the yard's wooden gate and jogged toward the wrecked truck, the dry snow squeaking beneath his boots. He prayed he didn't step on a patch of ice and fall face first.

A string of profanities tainted the brisk air as the engine died. The mailman slid the door open and stuck his head out. Usher skidded to a halt by the driver's side, the truck's tires still whirling, and squinted up at the man.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

“Yeah, thanks.” The guy wiggled out, swung his legs over and dropped to the ground next to Usher. “The postmaster is going to throw one hell of a fit, though. I’ve slid off the road twice in the past two months. Delivering mail around Stone Trail is nothing like doing it in Miami.”

“Miami, Florida?” Usher asked, recognizing the man. His heart performed a weird jitter in his chest. He’d seen the guy around town and glimpsed him a couple of times whenever he filled in for Jess at the local bar.

“Yep. I moved here to take care of my mother.” He flipped open a BlackBerry and placed a call. Someone answered it, and after explaining what had happened, the mailman grimaced and ended the conversation. “Like I said, the postmaster is pissed. It will be a while before a wrecker makes it out here. Most everyone living on back roads is still snowed in, and the ones who have been plowed out are in such a hurry to get to town for supplies there’s been several accidents.”

“Come in and have some coffee,” Usher offered, his heartbeat escalating. “There’s no sense in staying out here in this cold.”

The postman held out a gloved hand. “Jarreth Malloray.”

“Usher Addison,” he replied. Even through their gloves, something snapped between them. “Malloray, huh? Is Una Malloray your mother?”

He nodded.

“I know Una,” Usher stated, realizing that the small-world expression was very true. “I don’t know her well, but she moved to Stone Trail about ten years ago to live with her sister, didn’t she?”

“Yep. My aunt died six months ago, and then Mom got sick, so I’ve been here the last three months.”

“I’ve seen you around a few times,” Usher replied. “Other than when you deliver mail, I mean.”

“Same here.”

*Does that mean he’s noticed me? Nah, I’m probably reading too much into it.*

He motioned for Jarreth to follow him to the house. Inside, he hung their coats on the hall tree and then showed Jarreth where to put his boots to drip onto a blanket of newspapers. He led the way into a kitchen done in deep brown, white and a warm butter-yellow.

“Nice home,” said Jarreth with genuine appreciation in his voice.

“Thanks. My sister signed the house and farm over to me when she married and moved to Oregon with her husband.” He reached for a clean mug on a hand-made set of shelves. “I’m betting you take your coffee black?”

“How’d you guess?”

“When you’re an avid coffee drinker like I am, you can sort of tell how others take theirs.”

Jarreth pulled out a chair and sat at the table, but Usher couldn’t help thinking about other ways Jarreth might take things—like in the bedroom. Did he dominate, or was he submissive?

*Hell, he’s probably not even gay!* He shook his head slightly. *But there’s something about him, something that says he’s....*

The cell in Jarreth’s pocket chimed.

“Hello?” he said. “Really? Wow, that was fast.” He rattled off Usher’s address and then said goodbye. “Looks like a Good Samaritan loaded the nearest wrecked car on his flatbed, so

the tow truck that was called to pick it up will detour here instead.”

Disappointment assailed Usher. *Man, I’m such a pushover.*

As Jarreth accepted the cup of coffee from Usher, their fingers brushed. Usher sucked in a startled breath and nearly spilled the brew all over the tabletop. Jarreth stared up at him with interest in his dark-brown eyes. Humor lines deepened around them, giving him a rugged look.

Usher’s breathing sped up, and if he didn’t know better he’d swear his heart just performed a somersault. “Why don’t you join me at The Cannonball tonight?” he asked, surprising himself.

“Sure,” Jarreth answered. “I’ll buy you a few drinks as my way of saying thanks for saving me from sitting out in the cold.”

Elation swept through Usher, followed by wariness. “Uhm, maybe I should warn you....”

The look in Jarreth’s eyes hardened. “Is something wrong?”

“You might not want to be... uh....” He turned away and busied himself with topping off his mug.

“What?” Jarreth pressed.

“Let’s just say people might talk if they see you with me. I thought maybe I should warn you.”

“I don’t care about that kind of shit, Usher.”

He spun on his heel, surprise filling him. “Why not?”

“This is a tiny community. Small towns are full of people who have nothing better to do than talk about others. I’m from Miami, remember? I’ve seen all sorts of things go down. People are different in the city, and they’re often more accepting of

things. I don't pay attention to gossipers and shit-stirrers like the ones around here."

*Damn! Sounds like he's not gay after all.* Usher didn't know whether to be happy that Jarreth wasn't judgmental or disappointed that he obviously wasn't gay.

"Well?" said Jarreth. "What do you say? Still want to meet for a few drinks?"

"Sure." A glum sensation descended on Usher. He shouldn't let the locals get him down, so he pushed the feeling aside. "What time?"

Jarreth thought for a moment before he looked directly in Usher's eyes.

*Maybe this was a mistake.* Using his coffee cup as camouflage, Usher gulped hard and pretended to sip from it. *Every time the man looks at me my cock jumps to attention.*

"How about ten?" Jarreth offered. "I know it's late, but I won't be able to get Mom settled in bed until nine thirty when the home-health nurse arrives for the night shift."

An engine rumbled outside, drawing Jarreth's attention. He stood and turned toward the doorway. Up close, Jarreth was even better looking than Usher imagined. The man was every bit six foot three or four. Usher wasn't short by any means, but he liked his men to be at least a couple inches taller than he was.

Usher's gaze wandered over the planes of Jarreth's wide shoulders beneath the blue postal shirt and down to his ass encased in gray slacks. He'd love to be dominated by the man. An image of Jarreth on top of him flashed through Usher's mind, his face pressed into a pillow as Jarreth—

“Well, thanks for the coffee, Usher.” He gulped down the last of it and set his mug on the counter. “I can see the tow truck through the window, so I better get out there.”

Usher followed him into the tasteful foyer where Jarreth retrieved his coat and shrugged into it.

“Tonight at The Cannonball. Ten o’clock, right?”

“Yeah,” Usher replied. “Ten it is.”

The mailman smiled, revealing perfect white, straight teeth. “Good.” He jerked on his boots. “See you then.”

As Usher watched Jarreth navigate the slippery walk to the road, he regretted the so-called date. How was he going to hang out with the guy if all he wanted to do was get him into bed?

*I could just kick myself for asking him to meet me at the bar, but he’s so damn attractive I couldn’t help myself! Besides his good looks, there’s something about him that’s....* Usher couldn’t label it, but even if Jarreth wasn’t gay, he still wanted to see the man again. *Well, I guess I can pine for him from afar, but if I see him hit on any women, I’m going home.*

With his forehead pressed to the cold window glass, he surveyed the scene at the fence. The wrecker driver used a cable to pull the mail truck from the ditch and settled it onto the snow-packed road with a thud, where it rocked gently. Jarreth surveyed the vehicle, checked the tires and then gave the driver a thumbs-up, indicating everything was fine and functional. Both vehicles left, going opposite directions.

Sighing, Usher shut the door.

The phone jangled, and he snatched it from its base on the hall table. “Hello?”

“Usher, you better come over to my place,” his neighbor, Hanna Tope, said gravely.

It felt like the bottom of Usher's stomach fell out. Hanna's tone of voice wasn't a good sign. She was such a bubbly personality, so he knew her news couldn't be good.

"What's wrong, Hanna?"

"You know that sorrel yearling you've been missing for the last three days?"

"Aw, hell. You found her, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid so, darlin', or at least what's left of her."

"Shit."

"So are you coming over?" she asked.

"Yeah, give me about twenty minutes."

"You'll find me where our properties meet," she said. "I was putting hay bales out for the cattle, so if you can't get your Bronco to travel the wooded lane, we can load the corpse on the wagon instead. I'll bring a tarp out with me."

He hung up and reached for his boots, still dripping on the newspaper. Maybe now the game warden would pay attention to his worries about a large animal roaming the hills of Stone Trail, Virginia. First, however, he had to make sure the corpse was truly that of the little one-year-old filly.

Before slipping on his coat, Usher telephoned the game warden's office. A woman answered, stating she'd give him the message, but he was already addressing a poacher call on the other side of the county.

Fuming, Usher slammed the portable into its base. He grabbed his coat and keys and stormed outside.

Barking burst from the stable.

*Damn. I forgot I left Brock in the office.*

He hurried across the shoveled path to the stable, opened the door, and stepped aside as a red, furry blur burst through it, jumping and leaping.

The Irish Setter woofed in a chastising manner.

"I know, I know. It's been a crazy morning, so cut me some slack, boy."

Usher yanked a scarf from his pocket and wrapped it around his neck. His sister, Angie, had crocheted it and mailed it to him for Christmas. He fingered the soft, cushiony fibers and wondered what she'd think about the weird paw prints he'd been finding in the snow around the farm. Could a wolf that made six-inch paw prints really exist?

*Maybe I'll call Angie tonight and discuss it with her.* Just as quickly as the thought entered his head, Usher nixed it. The last thing Angie needed was to worry about him here alone on the horse farm several hundred miles away.

He opened the driver's door of his 1978 Ford Bronco and let Brock jump in to ride along. Whatever the strange tracks belonged to had to be dangerous. From now on Usher would make sure Brock was safely in the house before dark.

He climbed in behind the steering wheel and started the engine, allowing it to warm up a few minutes before putting the truck in gear. As he stared at the ice melting on the windshield, loneliness assailed Usher.

*It would sure be nice to have someone special to confide in and lean on.*

He patted Brock's head. As if he sensed his master's inner turmoil, the dog stared back at him with big, soulful brown eyes.

## Chapter Two

“DAMN it to Hell!”

“I warned you it was bad,” Hanna soothed.

Usher raked his gloved hands over the hat on his head as he surveyed the scene. The area around the yearling possessed so many tracks and mashed places it was impossible to tell much except that there had been a horrible battle to the death. Iced innards coated in hardened blood lay strewn over the snow. Torn muscles and ligaments hung from what was left of the filly’s body. Blood had seeped into the surrounding snow, freezing in a solid pool beneath the carcass. Frozen droplets of the life source covered the area where the horse’s neck had been and arced outward in a fan pattern. Bits of hide had been scattered around the area as if they were large pieces of confetti. The yearling’s mouth was twisted at an odd angle, her big teeth bared, tongue out. The spine and ribs, exposed to the sky, gleamed in the sunshine where the blood and meat had been licked clean from the bones.

Usher fought nausea and swallowed hard. “When you said it was bad, I was thinking along the lines of what an animal normally does when it attacks its prey. This is just....”

“Brutal and malicious?” she offered.

At a loss for words, he nodded.

“There’s something else, Usher.”

He glanced over at her, dread gathering in his gut.

Hanna motioned for him to join her by the horse's muzzle. "Look at this."

He stepped over a frozen red puddle and knelt next to his neighbor.

"Ever found a paw print that big before?" she asked.

"Yes, I've been finding them in the stable yard and the rear paddock about every other night for the last week or so." He pointed at the track. "The prints all have deep claw marks like this one."

She nodded. "So it's not a cat—but Usher, this thing has to be a freak of nature. These tracks are enormous." She clicked her tongue a few times, then sighed. "I'm worried about our livestock, especially the milk cows. We can't stand to lose any."

His startled gaze met hers. "This thing hasn't bothered any of your cattle yet?"

"No."

"I wonder why it chose one of my horses? If I was an animal, I'd go after the slower, easier prey like a cow, before I would a horse that runs fast and can kick fatal blows."

Hanna straightened. "That's a good point." She walked to the hay wagon and retrieved a rumpled blue tarp. "You better get hold of the game warden, darlin'. Whatever this animal is, it's dangerous. Are you sure you don't want to leave the body here? We might disturb evidence."

"Nope. The game warden won't return my calls, and the office personnel always says the same thing—he's out on a poaching call." Usher helped Hanna spread the tarp out on the ground. "If we leave the filly here, other wild animals will eat what's left of her and disturb the scene anyway. I might as well take the carcass home so I can photograph it for the insurance

company, and that way, if the damn game warden does answer one of my calls, he can examine the body. I'll keep the carcass in the freezer until then."

He walked back to the truck and opened the glove box, taking out a digital camera. Brock whined and wagged his tail.

"Need out to pee, fella?" Hanna called and patted her thigh. "Come on, you can get out."

The Irish Setter looked over at her, thumping the seat harder with his tail. Reluctantly, he hopped out of the Bronco and followed Usher toward the tarp, but stopped about a dozen feet away from it. The dog whined again, the sound high-pitched and uneasy.

"What's wrong, boy?" Usher asked and gently thumped the dog's haunch to get his attention.

Brock sat, another whine cutting through the air, and rubbed his head against his master's hip.

"Seems as though he senses whatever happened here," Hanna said. "Maybe it scares him."

The wind blew across the pasture field and into the woods of Usher's property. Snow drifted down from heavily covered limbs. The sun penetrated the flakes, shooting bright light shards in all directions. Ice crystals flew off the tops of fence posts to dust the tarp.

"Know what else is strange?" Usher asked.

She raised her head and looked at him as she straightened one corner of the plastic cover the wind had tousled. "What, darlin'?"

"Listen."

She frowned. "All I hear is the wind and one of the cows bellowin' up at the barn."

“That’s my point. There’s no sound of wildlife. No winter birdsong, no crows cawing, not even the chatter of chipmunks.”

Hanna looked around. She pushed her pale blonde hair back over one ear, her expression dubious, gray eyes wary. “Okay, let’s get this job done. You’re scaring me.”

After Usher took half a dozen pictures of the kill, he put the camera in his coat pocket and carefully grabbed the filly’s front hooves as Hanna grasped the back feet. Together, they lifted what was left of the carcass onto the tarp and dragged it to the Bronco’s tailgate, where they counted to three and heaved it up into the bed of the vehicle.

Usher shut the tailgate and stomped through the snow to the driver’s door. He opened it and started the engine. Brock issued a long plaintive sound.

“Come on, buddy.” He patted the seat. “We’re done, so let’s get out of here.”

The dog let out a woof that sounded like he said, “Oh, thank God!” and leapt up into the truck.

“Be careful, Hanna,” said Usher. “Don’t go outside after dark unless it’s absolutely necessary. Keep your doors and windows locked too. Until we find out what animal did this, be as cautious as possible, okay?”

“No need to warn me twice,” she said. “Ever since Bill died, I’ve been afraid to be out here on this farm at night, so one of the farmhands, Denver, is living in the guest room now.”

“Good.” He fastened his seat belt. “At least you’re not alone.”

Hanna climbed on the tractor, started it up, and traveled up the snowy ruts that led to her dairy farm. Once she reached the upper level where the house sat, Usher leaned over, closed the passenger door, and then put the Bronco in gear. He

navigated the narrow lane that traversed the fence on his side of the property line. Brock sat with his wet nose pressed to the passenger glass, leaving moist smears all over it.

*Man, I hope the four-wheel drive gets us home. I'd hate to be stranded in these woods and have to walk back to the house.*

Early afternoon sunshine shone through the bare tree branches. A hodgepodge of crisscrossed shadows patterned the smooth, undisturbed snow throughout the forest. Something about the slaughter of the filly bothered Usher, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was.

At least he had a night at The Cannonball to look forward to. He could forget his worries for a short time and admire Jarreth's handsome face and broad shoulders until it was time to go home. It had been years since Usher had had a lover. He sometimes went to the cowboy saloon for homosexuals over in Waylon, but it was a three-hour drive, and Usher didn't care much for the man-meat atmosphere of the gay singles bars.

Although rumors had run rampant about Usher and Zander, all of which were more or less true, no one but Angie knew the truth. Zander's death had been cruel and unfair. Usher followed a sharp turn in the narrow lane and eased over a deep rut. The memory of Zander on the mechanical bull flitted through his mind. He'd looked so pleased with himself, so handsome in his designer jeans and silver-tipped cowboy boots. But the jackass who he was about to defeat in the bull-riding contest had switched the machine over to high without warning. Losing his balance, Zander had fallen, snapping his neck as he'd crashed headfirst onto the padded floor.

Tears pricked Usher's eyes. Angrily, he blinked them away.

Yes, he was lonely. It would be nice to have someone just to hold him and talk into the wee hours of the night, but would it heal the scars left on his heart by Zander's untimely death?

Usher snorted and turned onto the township road that led to his farm. Sure, Jarreth was tall, with dark, brooding looks like Zander's had been, but the guy was known throughout Stone Trail as one of the mail carriers. People saw and chatted with him every day. Although Usher now doubted his suspicions that Jarreth was gay, and despite Jarreth's claims he didn't give a shit about small-town gossip, the man probably wouldn't want to have the locals whispering behind his back anyway.

He shouldn't be chasing the mailman, but Usher couldn't get the guy off his mind.

Minutes later at the farm, Usher wrapped the filly's carcass in heavy-duty garbage bags and stowed it in the big freezer on the back porch. He checked all the doors and windows in the stable, brought all the horses inside it and locked everything he could. He called the game warden again, but got an answering machine. Usher stoked the flames in the fireplace and then spent the evening watching reruns of "Special Unit 2" as Brock snored on the throw rug in front of the recliner and dreamed about chasing something, his big paws twitching in his sleep.

Usher's thoughts kept drifting to Jarreth with his dark-as-sin eyes. He remembered his black hair peeping out around his hat, the way his hands had wrapped around the coffee mug that morning, and Usher imagined how those same hands would feel encircling his hard cock.

He forced the lust racing through his body to subside, and rose to focus on preparing a late supper. Later, with a TV dinner of Salisbury steak cooling on the counter, Usher opened

a bottle of AmberBock and retired to the living room with Brock. He ate his meal as he watched the local news.

With his meal finished, he allowed Brock to lick out the plastic tray. The dog slurped the last bit from it, and Usher rose to walk to the kitchen and throw away the container. His pet whimpered at the back door.

“Need to go out, boy?”

The Irish Setter performed an anxious jig and wagged his tail.

“Let me get my coat. You’re not going out alone.”

Usher donned his parka and slipped his feet into his winter boots. He snapped a leash on Brock’s collar and prepared to open the back door when he caught the dog’s offended look.

“Oh no you don’t. You’re not dashing off into the woods to chase rabbits with that thing out there somewhere roaming around in the dark.”

Brock issued a disgruntled sigh and padded out the door in front of him.

“You’re on your own for a while tonight, Brock.” Usher watched his footing on the slick back porch and made a mental note to toss salt out on it first thing in the morning. “I’m going to The Cannonball to see a handsome guy tonight and find out more about him. So you better curl up next to the fireplace and enjoy watching Animal Planet on satellite.”

Chuckling, Usher descended the steps to the backyard.

HE WATCHED from the safety of the raspberry bushes. Although barren of leaves, the undergrowth grew so thickly he had to part the vines to see clearly.

The back door opened, and a long rectangle of amber light spilled out across the porch and the snow. The crystallized surface of the back lawn sparkled as if someone had sprinkled it with gold chips.

The aromas of a warm home reached him, mixed with the scent of cooked meat, an overheated dog, and the mild perspiration of a male human being. However, the subtle odor of a fresh kill encased in plastic emanated from somewhere on the porch. His stomach rumbled in response, but thankfully the man was too far away to hear it. He held his breath in case the canine detected it instead.

The dog's master held him on a leash. Wise decision. At least the dog couldn't go running into the woods, forcing the man to follow him.

He tipped his head back and sampled the night breeze, but detected only snow, a nearby stream, the odor of a polecat and the stench of cow shit.

The human tugged on the dog's leash, petted him, and then muttered words about going back inside where it was warm. The door shut quietly, and even from several yards away, he detected the click of the lock.

He turned and wiggled out of the berry bushes. Shaking snow from his coat, he padded into the woods. Hunger still plagued him. Somewhere there had to be an unsuspecting rabbit, or maybe even a deer.

With stealth, he began his hunt for food.

## Chapter Three

AS USHER entered The Cannonball, a few friendly voices called out greetings to him. He waved at a young married couple eating a late supper and nodded to the mechanics who worked at Murphy's Garage.

He crossed the bar, navigating the array of mismatched tables that littered the floor, and reached the counter where Jess met him with a bottle of AmberBock.

"How are you tonight, Usher?" She smiled and popped the cap off the beer bottle.

"Other than being cold, I'm fine. I can't wait for spring." Usher took off his hat, coat, and gloves and then accepted the beer and took a swig. "I've had about enough of freezing my ass off when I'm out on the farm."

Laughing, Jess picked up a towel and wiped the counter. "Tell me about it! The heater in my Subaru died a couple of nights ago."

"Take it to Murphy's," he replied.

"I will once payday gets here." The young woman reached into a cooler and withdrew a can of Bud Light, sliding it across the counter to a redheaded man. "Have things settled down out at your place?" she asked Usher.

He shook his head.

"Have you reached the game warden yet?" Jess's expression turned solemn. "I heard he's been running all over the county after poachers."

“Well, you heard right.” He let his gaze wander around the bar. Where was Jarreth? Had he changed his mind about their meeting?

“You looking for your friend?” asked Jess. She inclined her head toward the back of the establishment. “The new mail carrier in Stone Trail came in about ten minutes ago. He said if you asked, he’d be in the little booth by the dart boards. What’s his name anyway?”

“Jarreth Malloray.”

She stopped and rolled her eyes. “Oh, that’s right. He’s Una’s son. I forgot all about that.” She laughed. “My kids keep me so busy anymore it’s a wonder I can remember my own name.”

“What’s he drinking, Jess?”

“Wild Turkey on the rocks.”

“Pour him another and run a tab tonight.”

Once Jess poured the drink, Usher stuffed his winter gear under one arm. He picked up the tumbler along with his beer and maneuvered around the small dance floor where three couples slowly danced to George Strait’s “Amarillo by Morning” spilling from the bar’s sound system.

Upon seeing Usher, Jarreth smiled and motioned him over to the tiny booth. A gang of older college-aged kids threw darts at the electronic dart machines, their jokes and laughter loud in the little alcove. Soft white and pale blue lights lit the area. The games dinged and beeped each time a dart hit one of the boards, and the high-pitched giggles of a woman in one of the nearby booths sliced through both the music and the raucous hollers of the college students.

“Hey, I was beginning to think you weren’t going to make it,” Jarreth said loudly as he indicated for Usher to have a seat across from him.

“Thought the same thing about you too.” Usher smiled and sat down, tossing his things on the seat. “Jess gave me your message.” He slid the tumbler of Wild Turkey and ice across the tabletop. “Looks like I timed this just right.”

“Thanks!” Jarreth picked up the glass and raised it in the air. “To new friends and great times.”

Usher clinked his beer against the tumbler. *Is he hinting that he’s interested in me, or am I jumping the gun?*

“So, how’d your day go?” asked Jarreth.

Usher made small talk as he studied Jarreth’s rugged face. Five o’clock shadow darkened the man’s firm jaw line. He liked the way mischief danced in Jarreth’s deep brown eyes and how the soft lights deposited flaming blue jewels in his black, wavy hair. Each time Jarreth took a drink, Usher couldn’t help imagining his long-fingered hands wrapped around his cock or tracing patterns over his skin. He mentally berated himself for entertaining such thoughts, but he was so attracted to the mailman, he couldn’t help it. Even the way the guy’s Western-style shirt stretched across his shoulders had Usher practically salivating. Each pearly snap glimmered in the light, and Usher imagined undoing each one down... down to the top of Jarreth’s pants—

“Well?”

Usher blinked, his gaze zipping up from the last shirt snap pressed against the tabletop to Jarreth’s soul-piercing eyes. “Well what?”

“I asked if you’d like to play a few games of darts.” Humor lurked in Jarreth’s voice, and his eyes held mirth.

“Uh, yeah. Sounds like fun.” Usher cursed himself for letting his thoughts drift into such dangerous territory. “I must warn you, I hang out here a lot, so I’m pretty good at the game.”

“Oh?” Jarreth quirked a black eyebrow.

The expression in the man’s eyes ignited a fire in Usher’s balls. He gulped, playing nonchalant. “Yep. Just ask Jess. She’s the one who taught me a few tricks. Jess is so good at the game that the patrons barred her from participating in any of the dart tournaments.”

“Well then,” Jarreth said, sliding out of the booth, “let’s see what tricks you have up your sleeve.” His gaze swept Usher’s body.

*Was that a sexual innuendo?* Usher downed the last two gulps of his beer in an effort to calm himself. He watched Jarreth enter the game alcove and place two quarters on the machine’s game slots. The man said something to one of the college kids, who laughed. A twinge of jealousy hit Usher, but he shoved it away. *Where do I get off being jealous? The guy hasn’t proven he’s gay, and even if he is, he’s not made a move on me, so he’s probably not interested.*

Putting his erotic thoughts away, Usher stood and moved over to wait their turn since the kids were finishing up their last game. Once the students left, Usher took turns throwing darts with Jarreth and then they played against the young married couple he’d passed in the bar. They laughed and cracked jokes as Usher and Jarreth beat the couple three games out of four.

A waitress wandered over and called, “Hey, Usher. Jess wants to know if you two want another drink.”

“I’ll get this round,” said Jarreth.

“No, I’m running a tab tonight, so the drinks are on me.” Usher put his hand on Jarreth’s where he reached for his wallet in his back jeans pocket.

Something flickered through Jarreth’s eyes, the look smoky and enticing. “If you’re sure?”

“Tell Jess we’re ready, Cindy,” Usher said, more calmly than he felt. He jerked his hand away and motioned toward the booth. “I’ll order something to eat, too, if you’re hungry.”

“No thanks.” Jarreth walked away from him and slid into the seat. “I ate earlier.”

Cindy returned with another AmberBock and a whiskey over ice and then left them to talk.

Jarreth said nothing as he sipped his drink, his gaze roving the dance floor as the younger crowd gyrated and ground against one another. The hip-hop song blasted from the speakers, then changed to “Animals” by Nickelback.

At a loss for what to say, Usher feared the evening had drawn to an end. A mixture of elation and disappointment swirled through him. The night had gone well and they’d had a good time, but he was no closer to figuring out if this was a date or just two guy friends hanging out together.

*But the way he looked at me earlier was so sexual.*

He shook away his doubts, chugged his beer and then said, “I’m heading to the pisser.”

Jarreth nodded, his gaze still trained on the dancers.

Usher rose and navigated around the small dance floor. Maybe if he gave Jarreth a few minutes alone to think and regroup he’d play the next card. *Man, I hope I’m not wrong about this guy.* He shoved the men’s room door open. *Sometimes he seems like he’s gay and other times he doesn’t. I’m not sure what to think.*

Two men he didn't recognize stood at the only urinals in the facility, one dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt and the other wearing cargo pants and a white polo. With his bladder protesting, Usher opted to use one of the toilets instead of waiting. He stepped inside the stall and unfastened his pants.

"From what I understand," one man said, "this guy keeps calling the station."

"About what?" the other questioned.

"Something about a missing horse. Ramsey says he has better things to do than run to the opposite side of the county to see what a gay guy is squealing about."

The second man chuckled. "Yeah, I know what he means. Besides, the more poachers Ramsey nails and fines, the more money it generates for the county."

"Well, I hope Kate has a box of donuts waiting at the station tomorrow morning. She buys them at...."

The door opened and shut, leaving Usher alone, his mind reeling at what he'd just heard.

How did the game warden know about his sexual preference? And how could that jerk refuse to look into the death of his horse when other livestock in the area was in danger too?

Anger bubbled in Usher's gut. He finished relieving himself, washed and dried his hands, and left the restroom. As he made his way back to the table, the late-night crowd began filing into The Cannonball, and the part-time bartender hurried behind the bar to stow her purse and coat and jump into her job of filling drink orders. "Smooth" by Rob Thomas and Santana filtered out of the sound system.

"Hey, Usher!" Jess waved him over to the bar.

“What’s up, Jess?” he asked, still fuming over the conversation he’d overheard.

“The guy you were throwing darts with said to tell you he’d gotten a call from his mother, so he had to leave.” Jess held up one finger, indicating to a pushy customer to wait a moment. “He said something about his mom having nightmares, so he doubted he’d be back.”

“Damn.” Disappointment crashed through Usher.

“Poor Una,” Jess said. She paused to take the impatient patron’s order, then turned to grab a bottle of high-priced tequila from the mirrored shelves behind her. “She’s been sick for quite a while, hasn’t she?”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“Any idea what’s she’s ill with?”

“No,” he replied, “I honestly don’t know.”

“I hope everything is okay and she gets better soon.”

“Me too.” He turned to leave. “Thanks, Jess.”

“Oh, one more thing,” she said as she measured liquor into a mixer. “Can you fill in for me tomorrow night from five to eight? My kids have been staying at my sister’s for the last four days of their Christmas vacation and they’re coming home late afternoon tomorrow. I have to meet them at the airport.”

“Sure,” he said. “No problem.”

“See you tomorrow then!”

His anger at the men in the john and disappointment that Jarreth had left formed a ball of discontent in his gut. Usher grabbed his coat, slipped into it and put on his hat and gloves. He fished his keys from his coat pocket and headed for the door.

In his Bronco, he started it and pulled out of the parking lot without letting it warm up. *Might as well go home and go to bed. At least Brock won't abandon me.*

He navigated the half-frozen streets of Stone Trail and out onto the county road leading to his horse farm. He couldn't get the jerks in the restroom out of his mind. How dare the game warden ignore his calls simply because he'd heard he was gay! Fuming, he gripped the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles ached.

*Maybe I should trap the thing.* An image of the giant paw print rose in his mind. How could he trap the animal if he had no way of knowing how big it was? With a print six inches across, he'd have to rent a trap as big as a shed.

He sighed and reminded himself to slow down on the treacherous roads. As he approached the farm, Usher's anger calmed somewhat, and he decided to check on the horses before going to bed. He pulled into the drive, parked, and then got out to hear Brock barking like mad in the house.

Usher hurried to the front door, unlocked it, and burst into the foyer. Brock's agitated barks sounded from the back of the house like pistol reports. He pushed through the home, his boots leaving snow on the carpet, and found his dog at the backdoor. Brock stood on hind legs, his front paws on the window, muzzle pressed to the glass.

"What's wrong, boy?"

The dog whined anxiously, his tail swishing back and forth.

"Someone knock on the back door?"

Again, the animal whined.

Usher flipped on the porch light. He pushed the curtain aside and peered through the glass. His jaw dropped. He gaped

at the image on the porch outside but couldn't wrap his mind around it.

The lid to the freezer chest had been wrenched free and tossed where it lay half on the porch with its other end wedged in the snow.

Turning, he hurried through the kitchen, down the hall and into his bedroom where he took out the Colt .45 he kept loaded in the gun safe. He made sure a shell was in the chamber, flipped the safety off, and strode through the house where he unlocked the back door. The moment Usher opened it, Brock shot outside to sniff everywhere and everything.

Slowly, Usher stepped out on the planks, his senses attuned to any unusual sounds in the night. It took only seconds for him to find the numerous, huge paw prints in the snow. He listened intently, but the only things he detected were the wind whistling through the naked tree branches, the hum of the freezer chest, and Brock's urgent snuffling in the snow. Usher listened for any upset whinnies from the barn but heard nothing.

Flummoxed, he carefully picked his way back to the freezer. The hinges remained on the box, each one twisted and hanging loosely. He glanced at the lid wedged in the snow, its one end against the porch planks. Frowning, he looked in the freezer. The porch light revealed frozen dinners, a big ham, packages of burger, steak, chicken, and bags of vegetables, but the wrapped remains of the filly's body were gone.

Surprise skewered Usher. Why would an animal take the yearling's corpse? He stared into the chest as if the plastic-wrapped corpse would suddenly reappear.

Finally, he stepped off the porch and followed Brock to the edge of the woods. If the creature had somehow managed to lift

the yearling's body from the freezer, there should have been a path in the snow from where it dragged it into the trees, but all Usher found was more paw prints.

*What the hell is going on?*

Brock growled low in his throat, but it quickly transformed into yet another worried whine.

"Let's go check on the horses, boy."

Usher slogged across the snow-covered back lawn and around the house to the gate leading into the front paddock. He entered the stable through the office. With the Irish Setter at his side, he wandered from stall to stall, checking the locks on each one and the two exits leading directly to backside paddocks.

Satisfied, he flipped the .45's safety on and left the stable, securing it behind him.

As he crossed the property to the house, he pondered calling the police, but it would be morning to mid-afternoon by the time they showed up, if they came at all. He didn't have proof the animal had taken the yearling's remains, either. Sure, there were giant paw prints leading to the porch and back to the woods, but there didn't seem to be any evidence on the freezer that pointed to an animal as the perpetrator. No teeth marks were visible on the metal or the edges, and there didn't seem to be any claw marks either. By morning, the wind would have erased the paw prints.

He could only imagine the discussion he'd have with the authorities. They'd laugh until they pissed themselves and then head to town for coffee. Calling the game warden's station was pointless now too.

Usher slipped the Colt .45 in between his belt and belly. He hefted the freezer lid, placed it back on the chest and

opened the back door. “Let’s go inside, Brock. There’s nothing we can do about this tonight.”

With his tail drooping, the dog padded into the kitchen.

Usher glanced at the mashed places in the snow. Something about the paw prints bothered him. He stepped over to a patch of tracks and knelt. Nearby, he saw a set of Brock’s prints.

*Oh, holy hell!* He gaped at the imprints. *It can’t be possible.*

Delicately, he reached out and traced a finger over a print. Looking at Brock’s set of imprints, he knew he was seeing the truth. Whatever had made the huge pawmarks had been walking on two feet. A cat’s back paws stepped in the print of its front paws and no claw marks were made since they kept them retracted until threatened or hunting. A dog’s or bear’s tracks would overlap and their claws protruded, so the tips would imbed in the mud, sand or snow, but there was no overlapping in these tracks.

*This isn’t a dancing bear, so how can an animal walk upright like a man?* To be sure, he’d have to ask Doc Evirgrew, Stone Trail’s veterinarian and Usher’s good friend, if there was anything special or unusual about a wolf’s paw prints.

Unease and a bit of paranoia tickled Usher’s senses. Whatever had left the pawmarks was out there somewhere. He hurried to the porch. Once the door was shut behind him, Usher cast one last appraising look across the snowy backyard. Feeling anxious, he engaged the lock.

A COLD, wet nose in his face roused Usher. Blinking, he grimaced and pushed Brock, who stood with his front paws on the arm of the recliner, away and sat up.

Usher raked one hand over his face as he squinted at the television. “What the hell time is it?” He turned and looked at the mini grandfather clock sitting on the fireplace mantel. “Shit. It’s two fifteen in the morning.”

The Irish Setter stood up on the recliner’s arm again. The dog whined, the sound long and low. He dropped to all fours, padded to the kitchen doorway, paused, and looked back at his master.

“What’s wrong, fella?”

Brock woofed softly.

With a sigh, Usher rose and shuffled across the room. Brock hurried into the kitchen and waited at the back door, tail low, hackles up.

“What is it with you tonight?” As Usher’s brain woke up and his vision cleared, he suddenly remembered the condition of the porch freezer and the big tracks in the snow. “Is the animal back? Is that what’s bothering you, boy?”

Brock issued a high-pitched noise and pressed his nose to the threshold, where he snuffled.

Flipping on the porch light, Usher pushed the curtains aside and peered through the icy filigree dressing the glass. Through a hole in the frost, he saw a wolf sitting on its haunches. Startled, he blinked and looked again.

*Damn, that’s a big animal. It has to be the same one that killed the filly and tore up the freezer lid.*

Although he couldn’t really tell what color its fur was, the wolf’s eyes glowed eerily, the color yellow-white in the dim illumination.

*Why doesn’t it run? The light should’ve frightened it away.* He studied it for a moment. Although it was believed that no wolves were in the Blue Ridge Mountains, people around Stone

Trail insisted they saw an occasional timber wolf in their fields or woods. A large male could easily weigh a hundred-and-fifty pounds, but this one appeared to be at double that weight. However, in the shadowy edges of the light's reach, Usher could only speculate on its size. *It still doesn't seem quite big enough to have made all those tracks.*

He reached for the phone on the wall. Regardless of how long it took the game warden to investigate, there seemed to be a wolf problem in the Stone Trail area that threatened the livestock and could very well be a threat to citizens too.

As Usher wrapped his fingers around the receiver, the phone jangled.

"Shit!" He closed his eyes in an effort to calm his thrashing heart. Finally, he picked up the receiver, wondering who could be calling him as such an insane hour. "Hello?"

"Usher?" Hanna Tope's voice carried a note of concern.

"Hanna! Are you all right?"

"I'm sorry to call you so late, but there was a disturbance over here. Something frightened the shit out of my cattle. By the time we got outside to see what was going on, the thing was on its way across the field toward your property."

"Could you tell what it was?"

"No." She sighed. "But we saw enough to know it was big and heading straight for your farm."

"Well, I'm staring at a wolf in my backyard right now." He parted the curtains to look outside again, but only a snow-covered lawn greeted him. "Damn, it's gone now."

"Are the horses locked up?" she asked.

"Yeah, I double-checked before coming in for the night. Nothing is going to get in the stable unless it can knock down heavy wood walls or chew through them."

“Don’t go out until daylight, Usher.” The worry in Hanna’s voice sent a tendril of fear through Usher’s gut. “That form we saw was huge. For some reason it didn’t hurt any of the cows, but me and Denver both got the weird impression whatever the animal was, it was having a good time scaring the hell out of them. They’ll be off their milk for days now.”

“Lock up the house, Hanna,” he said with conviction. He debated on telling her about the paw prints, but changed his mind. There was no sense in worrying the woman until he knew something for certain. “Make sure all the windows are secured too.”

“I will, darlin’. Good night.” The line clicked.

Usher glanced through the frosty pane again. As crazy as it seemed, he didn’t feel they were dealing with a wolf. No, this animal was something different, maybe a freak of nature or.... He shrugged and stepped away from the window to go to the refrigerator. Whatever it was, the game warden was going to have a serious problem on his hands if he didn’t address the issue.

“Come on, boy,” he said, patting his hip to draw Brock away from the door. “Have a nighttime treat. Then let’s head to bed. The only things up at this hour are the ones that go bump in the night.”

He fed Brock a couple of dog biscuits and then fixed a glass of chocolate milk for himself. After rinsing out his glass, he put it in the drainer and wandered through the house to his bedroom, where he stripped and climbed into bed. Chilled, he pulled the comforter up to his chin.

At the bedside, Brock made three tight circles on the floor and settled on the throw rug for the night. The dog sighed, and

upon hearing him, Usher closed his eyes and succumbed to sleep.

PUSHING through the berry bushes on the outskirts of the lawn, he exited on the other side and padded across the snowy forest floor. He hadn't meant for the man to see him. Although the guy would probably chalk it up to a rare wolf sighting, he still hated the idea that it might draw attention to the rest of the wolf clan.

However, if the evil one wasn't caught soon, the clan, the man and his horses, and those around Stone Trail might suffer. He couldn't let that happen, and if his senses regarding Usher were true, he might not ever find another person like him.

He paused and put his snout into the wind. The evil one was nearby. Maybe he could locate him and put an end to his terror.

## Chapter Four

THE following night, Usher tended bar for Jess at The Cannonball. Only a few minutes into his short fill-in shift, he couldn't stop himself from thinking about his meeting the previous night with Jarreth. They'd had such a good time talking and throwing darts. Although the man had told Jess his mother's night nurse had called him home, Usher couldn't help thinking he'd done or said something that had upset the guy and he'd made an excuse to bow out. And when he'd watched for Jarreth to deliver his mail that day, a different postal carrier was driving the route.

At eight o'clock, Jess walked in to take over for the rest of the shift. Usher filled her in on who was drinking what at the counter and pointed out two troublemakers in the middle of the room.

Usher grabbed his coat off a hook and shrugged into it. "If you have any problems with those dickweeds and Mikey needs someone to help him bounce them out of here, you have my number."

"Thank you for filling in for me, honey." Jess kissed his cheek and then tugged Usher's hat down over his ears. "You're such a sweetie. I sure wish you could find someone as sweet as you are."

Half-amused and half-flustered, Usher snorted. "Yeah, me too." He waved to a couple of regular customers as he walked

around the counter. “Be careful going home, Jess. The weatherman reported freezing drizzle tonight.”

“I will,” she called across the bar.

Outside, Usher paused to draw in a lungful of frigid air. The temperature had shifted, and a heavy mist filled the town. The streetlamps and lighted signs glowed dimly in the night. The headlights of vehicles swept through the fog like miniature lighthouse beams. Down the street, raucous laughter burst from the bowling alley as a group of teenagers headed for their homes.

Once again, his thoughts drifted to Jarreth. What was he doing right now?

*Man, I sure hope he’s not pissed at me for something I did or said last night.*

With a sigh, he made his way to his Bronco, digging in his jeans pocket for his keys. Two swaths of light raked over Usher, and a black, extended cab Dodge Ram pulled into the empty spot next to his truck.

“Hey, Usher,” a familiar voice called as the driver’s door opened.

He paused in unlocking the Bronco and looked around the cab at Jarreth. Delighted, he smiled. “What are you doing here?”

“Actually, I was looking for you.” Jarreth smiled back, his teeth stark in his face. “I stopped out at your place, but then I realized you might be here helping Jess or just having a couple of beers.”

“You were looking for me?” The moment the words left his mouth and he heard his hopeful tone, Usher wished he could take them back. Inwardly, he groaned. *Shit! I sound like a*

*lovesick kid*. He watched Jarreth's face for a reaction, but the mailman just kept smiling at him.

"I felt bad about leaving suddenly last night, so I was going to buy you a late dinner as my way of apologizing."

"Is your mom all right?"

Jarreth nodded and stepped down from the extended-cab truck to face him across the hood of the Bronco. "One of Mom's medicines gives her bad nightmares, and she's suffering the onset of dementia, too, so between the two conditions, she can be a handful to calm down. Then today I was tied up taking her to doctor appointments."

"Aw, man. I'm sorry." Usher wanted to help Jarreth, to make things better for him and his mother, but he was at a loss of what he could do. At least he now knew he hadn't done anything to offend Jarreth and why he wasn't on his mail route today. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked.

"No." The mailman flipped the collar of his coat up, warding off the thick mist. "There's nothing that can be done for Mom other than be there for her and make her as comfortable as possible." He turned toward the driver's door and looked over his shoulder. "So, do you want to get a bite to eat or not?"

The desire to be with Usher proved almost overwhelming, but he needed to let Brock out for a few minutes and supper already waited for him at home.

At his hesitation, Jarreth quirked a dark eyebrow. "Something wrong? If you already made plans, it's not a problem, really."

"No, no. It's nothing like that," Usher said quickly, desperate to keep him from leaving. "It's just that my dog has

been locked in the house all evening and I put a roast with vegetables in a Crockpot before I left.”

Jarreth stared at him quietly. He slipped behind the steering wheel but didn’t shut the door.

*Is he angry with me? Or is he...? A realization hit Usher. I think he’s disappointed.*

An idea formed, and Usher rushed on. “Why don’t you follow me back to the farm and share supper with me instead? I made plenty.” He chuckled. “If you want to know the truth, it’s a huge roast, and I packed the remaining room in the crock with vegetables so I wouldn’t have to cook for two or three days.”

“Roast sounds great,” Jarreth replied as a smile wiped the stoic expression from his face. “I’ll stop and get some beer and be right behind you. How’s that sound?”

Excitement fluttered through Usher’s chest. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Then I’ll see you in about fifteen or twenty.”

Elated, Usher jumped in his truck and drove home feeling like he was floating along the highway. He wanted to rush back and have the table set before Jarreth met him there, but the cloying mist prevented him from driving any faster than thirty-five.

*Maybe he is interested in me after all.* He turned onto the township road, followed it for half a mile and then pulled into the drive where he parked the Bronco, shutting off the headlights. *Jarreth seemed disappointed when he thought I wasn’t going to have dinner with him, so maybe—no, I’m reading too much into this. Jarreth might not be gay. He probably just wants a good friend, since he’s fairly new in town.*

The truth was that Jarreth seemed to send him sexual signals one minute, and then the next Usher felt the man was only interested in a platonic relationship.

A blast of icy wind hit him square in the face as he rounded the back of the truck. It took his breath away. “Damn!” he muttered and hurried along the shoveled path to the front door.

Barking issued from inside the house, reminding Usher of the unseen and sinister visitor of the past few nights. He halted and glanced around, but Brock’s barks were I’m-happy-you’re-home-because-I-have-to-pee barks. Unlocking the door, he stepped aside so his pet wouldn’t knock him down on his way out. Usher paused for a moment, the aroma of cooking meat, spices and vegetables wafting over him. However, he soon pulled the door shut and waited as the Irish Setter hurried to the edge of the yard and hiked his leg on the fence. Finished, he bounded back to his master as if sensing his good mood.

In the house, Usher shed his winter gear and strode into the kitchen, where he began taking plates and glasses down from a cabinet. He set the table and then cut the roast, arranging meat and vegetables on a platter that he placed in the center of the table. At the counter, he gathered some condiments and set them on a small, stainless-steel tray.

“Smells great!”

Usher whirled, knocking the tray to the floor with a clatter, and reached for his Colt, which he realized wasn’t holstered at his hip. “Fuck! You scared the hell out of me!”

Jarreth froze in the doorway, clutching a six-pack of AmberBock in each hand. A look of uncertainty settled over his features. “Dude, the door was open. I came on in and shut it so all the heat wouldn’t escape.”

“The door was open?” Puzzled, Usher looked past him and down the hall.

“Yeah.”

By the stove, Brock lifted his head and growled. The dog bared his teeth, his hackles up.

“Stay here,” said Usher. “Don’t move.” He quietly walked down the hall, peeked into his bedroom, and, seeing nothing, crossed to the gun safe and took out his .45, still in its holster.

He returned to the bedroom doorway. Jarreth met his gaze, his expression grave. Slowly, Usher tiptoed down the hall, pausing at the spare bedroom. It proved empty too. He moved to the sewing room he used for an office. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, Usher progressed to the foyer. There, by the front door, lay large, wet, paw-shaped footprints on the hardwood floor. They led to the first entrance to the living room. Whatever had entered the house had stopped within a couple feet of entering the room, then turned, and walked back out.

Behind him, Jarreth asked, “What’s wrong?”

Usher pointed at the melting prints.

Frowning, Jarreth looked from the tracks to Usher’s face. “What the hell are those?”

“I’ll explain later,” said Usher. He took his coat down from the hall tree and stepped into his snow boots.

“Look.” Jarreth grabbed Usher’s upper arm. “It’s obvious something came in here.” He gestured to the wet places just inside the living room threshold. “And for whatever reason, it chose to go back outside. Maybe it sensed the dog or heard us talking, but if it was brave enough to come in the house, then it’s probably not safe to go outside.”

“I just need to check on the horses,” Usher replied.

“I’ll go with you.”

The look of concern and determination on Jarreth's face sent a spear of pleasure through Usher. "Don't worry. I'll be right back."

Brock shot out the door as Usher opened it. The dog stayed at his side and padded to the stable with him. Upon finding the barn still locked, Usher paused outside and listened. The occasional noise of a stomping hoof, a nicker, and a feed bucket banged against a stall reached him. If anything had disturbed them, the horses would be spooked and restless.

Satisfied everything was as it should be, Usher returned to the house with Brock, his boots slipping on the hardening snow. He shut the door, shrugged out of his coat, and returned his boots to the mud box. In the kitchen, he found Jarreth stowing the six-packs in the refrigerator. With the necks of two bottles between the fingers of one hand, Jarreth shut the fridge door.

Straightening, he said, "I take it everything's okay at the barn?"

"Yeah." He checked to be sure the safety was still on and placed the .45 on a countertop.

"I used a couple of paper towels to wipe up the water in the foyer." After popping the tops off two AmberBocks, he handed one to Usher. "So what's going on?"

Usher met his gaze. He seemed genuinely concerned. *Should I tell him? He might think I'm crazy.* Mentally, he shrugged away the thought. It didn't make any difference whether he told Jarreth his theory about the animal, or the game warden. Blurting out, "There's a big animal prowling Stone Trail that walks upright like a man," would make any person label him as a nutcase.

"Sit down. We'll load up our plates and then talk about it."

Jarreth nodded and sat at the table.

Usher asked Jarreth questions about his mother, his job as a mail carrier, and even brought up the weather. In turn, Jarreth inquired about Usher's family and how he became a horse breeder.

Halfway through the meal, Usher rose and retrieved two more beers from the refrigerator. *Jarreth probably thinks I'm the most boring person he's ever met.*

He removed the bottle caps, his attention landing on Jarreth's hair. The lights created strands of blue flames in it. *Man, does he have gorgeous hair! I could spend hours just stroking those wavy locks.* He admired his broad, powerful shoulders, but as his groin stirred, Usher focused on the matter at hand and set his guest's beer on the table.

"So, what's going on out here on your farm?" Jarreth questioned. "I know paw prints when I see them, and whatever made those tracks in the foyer has to be a big animal."

Swigging his beer, Usher nodded and then set the bottle down. "I've been finding huge tracks around the farm too."

"What do you think it is?"

Pushing his plate aside, he sighed. "It killed one of the fillies and took the corpse out of the big freezer on my back porch where I stored it to show the game warden. The damn animal ripped the lid plumb off the hinges."

Jarreth paused in taking a drink, his eyes full of surprise. "Why would it take the carcass from the freezer?"

"I don't know, but it really bothers me. It's like it's... well... like it's...."

"Intelligent?"

He cringed, nodding. "Then, last night, the animal scared the hell out of the neighbor's cattle." He explained how cat,

bear, and canines leave tracks, and what he'd discovered outside the back door the night before. "I plan on asking Doc Evirgrew whether or not a wolf's footprints overlap. He's Stone Trail's resident veterinarian."

"I know of him," said Jarreth. "Sounds like a good idea, but I think you should contact the game warden or the police too."

"You're from Miami. Cops will respond to calls in Miami within a few minutes, but in these parts, it might be the next day, if at all, that they show up."

On the floor, Brock rolled onto his side, groaning sleepily, and stretched out across the throw rug.

With his sock-covered foot, Usher rubbed the dog's side. "The county police don't pay attention to anything around here unless it's drugs, murder, kidnapping, or a really bad accident," he continued. "There just aren't enough taxes or manpower for such a sparsely populated area. The terrain is tough to navigate, and during bad weather the roads are treacherous."

"But something was in your home, Usher." Jarreth's dark eyes met his, the worry in them clear. "You should report it."

"I can report it, but the only thing the dispatcher will do is make a note of it."

"Shit, it looks like I moved to Bum Fucked, Egypt."

Usher burst out laughing. Brock raised his head, looking pointedly at his master as if to say he'd disturbed a particularly good doggy dream. Seeing the expression on his pet's face urged him to chuckle hard.

"Stone Trail is still a nice place to live," Usher said. "And things like violent crime seldom happen around here. The

worst you usually hear about is a hunting accident or someone getting busted for growing marijuana.”

“Regardless, Usher, you need to warn people that there’s a dangerous animal roaming these parts.”

“Hanna Tope owns the farm that runs against mine.” Usher stood and began gathering dirty dishes. “Folks will pay attention when Hanna decides to say something.”

“Why wouldn’t they listen to you?”

He couldn’t look at Jarreth. He scraped the plates clean and set them on the counter by the sink. “Some will, but most won’t.”

“Because...?”

Usher said nothing. Running hot water into the sink, he added Dawn and watched the bubbles form. *If I’m wrong about Jarreth, and he finds out I’m....* He distracted himself by setting the dirty dishes in the water.

Jarreth startled him by appearing at the sink next to him. He picked up the sponge and dropped it into the bubbles. “I’ll wash, you rinse.”

They worked side by side for several minutes. Jarreth washed all the dishes and each individual utensil, his strong hands moving as though he did menial chores every day. He placed each item into the adjoining basin full of clear water. His long, strong fingers, with a slight hint of dark hair on them, mesmerized Usher. What would they feel like caressing his body? He imagined them sliding down his ribs and then Jarreth grasping his ass, their cocks belly to belly, thighs pressed together.

“When did you realize you were gay?” Jarreth asked.

The water glass Usher held slipped from his hands and hit the edge of the sink, shattering. Brock startled and, with a disgruntled snort, moved to lie in the kitchen doorway instead.

“Shit,” he hissed.

“I’ll get it.” Jarreth knelt and picked up the pieces. “Luckily the glass is thick, so it only broke into three pieces.” He picked them up, opened the cabinet under the sink, finding the trashcan, and dropped the shards into it. Standing, he said, “I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t.” Usher set silverware into the dish drainer. “Startled me, yes, but you didn’t upset me.” He waited as Jarreth finished washing a ladle and the meat fork. “I guess you’ve heard the talk about me and my partner, Zander?”

“Actually, no.” Dropping the items into the rinse water, Jarreth squeezed the sponge free of soap and water and then turned to wipe down the table. “Everything I’ve heard about you has been good. Jess speaks highly of you, and so does your neighbor, Hanna Tope. Regardless, I sensed you were gay, and no, I don’t have a problem with it.” He paused, his gaze so intense that Usher fought the urge to look away. “If you don’t mind me asking, where is your partner?”

“He died.”

A look of regret flashed across Jarreth’s face. “I’m sorry, man.”

“It’s been a few years, but the pain’s still there.”

“Pain like that doesn’t go away overnight.”

The way Jarreth spoke tugged at Usher’s heart. He smiled at the man. “You’re right. It doesn’t.”

Jarreth finished the task of cleaning up the tiny slivers of glass that had escaped his attention, and Usher took the

sponge from him, letting the water out of both sinks and rinsing them out.

“You might not have a problem with me being gay,” said Usher, “but some folks around here certainly do.”

“How so?”

“Well,” said Usher, “because I’m gay, the game warden is ignoring my calls about the trouble out here.”

“How do you know that?”

Usher put the leftovers in containers, set them in the fridge and withdrew two more beers. “Let’s go into the living room and sit by the fireplace,” he said. “I’ll tell you more once we sit and relax.”

He led Jarreth into the next room where he sat in the recliner, and Jarreth chose the wing-backed chair closer to the fire. Slowly, the story about the men at the Cannonball spilled forth from Usher.

“What a bunch of jackasses,” Jarreth muttered, once Usher had finished his story. “I suppose it’s worth it to the warden to ignore it and jeopardize someone’s life?”

“I don’t know.” Usher put the beer bottle to his lips and drank deeply. Finished, he set it on the side table and stared into the crackling fire. “I barely know the guy, but for some reason he seems to have issues with me. The few times I’ve bumped into him at The Cannonball or around Stone Trail, he’s been abrupt and rude.”

“I’m not standing up for the guy, but sometimes people just come across that way.”

“Maybe,” Usher stated, unconvinced.

“Let me see if I can make a couple of phone calls and get someone out here to investigate the disturbances on your farm.” Shifting in his chair, Jarreth reached over, picked up

another chunk of elm from the wood box, and tossed it into the fireplace. “Maybe if I state something about a couple people on my mail route being worried about a wild animal, someone will take this more seriously.”

“I’d appreciate it, man. I can’t stand to lose any horses, especially the yearlings. The filly was insured, but I would’ve gotten more out of selling her than what the insurance company will pay me.” He sighed and shook his head. “Financial ruin scares the hell out of me, and I’d hate to sell this place and have to move to the city to look for work.”

The faint sound of something pattering against the windows snared Usher’s attention. He rose and parted the curtain to look out the bay window. A solid sheet of ice prevented him from seeing anything.

“Shit, it looks like the weather turned bad faster than the weather report forecasted it would.”

He crossed the living room and exited through the doorway by the foyer. Opening the door, he stepped onto the porch and glanced around outside. The temperature had dropped a couple hours earlier than predicted. The drizzle was already freezing on everything. The electric lines glistened in the light cast by the security lamp out front. The fence, mailbox, and the two trucks all wore shiny mantles of ice.

“How’s it look out there?” Jarreth asked behind him.

“Dude, I think you’re stuck here for the night.” Usher looked over his shoulder at his guest. The idea of Jarreth sleeping under his roof excited him. A tendril of anticipation curled through his gut. “I’d hate it if you tried to go home in this mess and had a wreck.”

Jarreth stepped into the foyer and looked over Usher's shoulder. "So much for accurate weather forecasts, eh?" He laughed. "If you don't mind me staying, I think it's a good idea."

"Not at all." Usher shut and locked the door, but upon turning around, he found Jarreth still standing close to him. His breath caught in his throat, and his heart rate jerked into racing gear.

"Well," said Jarreth with a crooked smile, "in that case, I guess you have me sleeping here tonight."

## Chapter Five

AT THE soft way Jarreth spoke and the underlining suggestion in his comment, adrenaline zipped through Usher's body. *No, no... I'm making too much out of it.*

"How about we play some cards or we find a good movie to watch?" Jarreth suggested. He offered Usher a crooked smile, and Usher's heart lurched.

*Why does he have to be so damn sexy? I don't even think he's aware he's doing it.*

"Unless you're tired and need to go to bed," Jarreth added.

"No, not at all. I'm wide awake." Once the words left his mouth, heat crept into his cheeks. *Damn it, I sound like an overzealous schoolboy.* He moved past Jarreth, his every nerve aware of the man's proximity and the heady aroma of some sort of crisp cologne. "Which is it? Cards or a movie?"

"Let's see what's on TV. Then we'll decide."

"Sounds good to me."

"You check the guide," Jarreth suggested, "while I telephone the night nurse and let her know what's going on."

Usher added a couple more pieces of wood to the fire and then fished for the remote wedged between the recliner's seat cushion and its side. He brought up the guide and cycled through the movies.

"What about a pay-per-view movie?" Usher suggested, once Jarreth snapped his cell phone shut.

“Nah, I don’t want you to have to pay for a movie,” said Jarreth. He reached for his beer, took a sip. and then returned it to the end table.

“Honestly, it’s okay. I suck at cards.”

Jarreth laughed. “All right, what’s on pay-per-view?”

Surfing through the guide, Usher spotted a movie he’d been wanting to see. At the same time, they both said, “How about *Predators*?”

They looked at one another and burst out laughing. Usher purchased the movie just as it was about to start.

“Why don’t you come over here on the sofa where you can see the TV better?” Jarreth said.

Thrilled, Usher nodded and picked up his beer. He settled on the opposite end of the couch. Although only two feet separated them, Usher felt closer to Jarreth than he’d felt to anyone in a long, long time.

Brock entered the room and sprawled out in front of the fireplace. He issued a long, contented sigh, closed his eyes, and started snoring.

“Is your mom okay?” asked Usher.

“Yeah, luckily she’s having a restful night. The nurse said that she was just about to call me because she’s afraid to drive home in this mess. I told her to sleep wherever she’s comfortable and stay there until she can find someone to replace her. Otherwise, I’ll be home whenever I can get back to town.”

Usher relaxed and concentrated on the movie. It felt nice to have a friend just to chill with. Zander used to love to watch action thrillers. He’d always bet Usher on which character would be killed first, and who besides the hero would survive by the end of the movie. A slight smile tugged at Usher’s

mouth. Nine out of ten times, Zander's choices were always correct, and the prize was always a massage, but Usher never complained. He loved investigating every nook and cranny of Zander's body. Momentarily lost in his memories, the pain of losing Zander rushed in on him, taking him by surprise. He drew in a deep breath and tried to return his attention to the movie.

He looked askance at Jarreth. *Am I attracted to him because he reminds me so much of Zander?* His guest's profile looked so strong, so handsome. *No, there's something else about him that draws me too. Jarreth has a magnetic personality and a warmth about him.*

Later, the flick over, Usher rose and stretched. He looked down at Jarreth, who sat with his arm across the back of the sofa, his body nestled in the corner. He wore a lazy smile and a come-hither look shone in his eyes.

Gulping, Usher motioned toward the television. "That was a damn good movie."

Jarreth nodded, his grin growing wider. "A definite DVD to add to my to-buy list. Mom and I have a huge collection."

*Is he aware of what he's doing to me or is it just his natural sex appeal?*

Raising his arms over his head, Jarreth stretched, too, and let out a groan that sounded so sexual.

*Damn. Everything he does screams sexy.*

The wind howled through the eaves, and what sounded like pebbles thrown against the window drew Usher's attention. Brock raised his head, blinked, and then lowered his muzzle to the floor again.

"Sounds like its getting nasty out there," Jarreth observed.

“I better get some more wood. When the wind blows like this, it’s hard to keep the house warm.” Grateful for the distraction, Usher strode into the foyer and stepped into his boots. He paused in the kitchen to pick up the Colt, secured it in the waistband of his jeans, and then opened the back door, flipping on the light as he stepped outside.

Freezing rain, driven by a harsh, biting wind, slashed at the house and needled through his heavy shirt. Usher was glad he’d thought to cover the wood stacked against the house. He pulled the tarp back, the plastic stiff with ice. It cracked and thin sheets of frozen precipitation slipped into the snow, smashing holes into its frozen crust. He loaded up with chunks of wood, and carefully stepped up on the porch, the black ice there treacherous. Jarreth met him at the door. On Usher’s way back, he passed Jarreth with an armload of wood too.

“I’ll get another load and that should do us for the night,” he called over his shoulder.

Usher gripped a support pole to keep from falling, and managed to step into the snow again. As he pulled a chunk of locust from the stack, the end of the cord slipped and fell out into the snow. Swearing, he knelt and restacked the firewood before gathering the last armload. Balancing the chunks in his left arm, he tugged the tarp over everything with his other hand and secured it with a chunk of oak, so the wind wouldn’t blow the plastic cover into the woods. He halted and looked around the backyard.

Everything wore a shiny coat of ice. The trees shimmered in the porch light, ice sparkling in their limbs. The undisturbed portions of the snow reminded Usher of a fairy tale his mother had read to him as a small boy, about a princess at the top of a glass mountain. With the firewood growing heavier in his arms, he searched the edge of the woods where the light couldn’t

penetrate. Was there a Big Bad Wolf lurking in the darkness? The thought certainly gave the story *Little Red Riding Hood* a different perspective.

“Something wrong?” Jarreth asked from the doorway.

“No, I was just looking at the ice and thinking.”

Walking up on the porch, he hurried into the house and stacked the logs next to the fireplace. As he turned around, he found Jarreth directly behind him. Startled, he watched, transfixed, as Jarreth reached out and touched his cheek with the pad of one thumb. That one tiny touch ignited a flame of longing so intense in Usher that he thought his heart would explode.

*Holy shit! He’s going to kiss me!*

Jarreth smoothed something away and then moved back. “Sorry. You had water drops on your face.”

He turned and sat on the couch where Brock nuzzled him for attention. Smiling, he scratched the dog behind his ears and was rewarded with a contented moan.

Embarrassed, Usher focused on stoking the fire, the heat in his cheeks more intense than the heat of the flames. *I can’t believe I actually thought he was going to kiss me. I’m such an idiot!* He stabbed red embers with the poker. *I’ve got to stop daydreaming about Jarreth. The guy’s obviously not interested.*

Finished with the fire, Usher let Brock out. He made short work of doing his business and rushed back inside.

“If you don’t mind,” said Jarreth, “I’m ready to crash.”

Disappointed the evening had come to a sudden end, Usher strove to keep his expression neutral. “Sure. You can sleep in the guest room.”

“If you give me a blanket and a pillow I’ll just sleep here on the sofa.” Jarreth unfastened his belt and pulled it free of the loops. “I like it here by the fire.”

That one action of removing his belt sent Usher’s pulse into warp drive. He imagined the jeans falling around his guest’s ankles, followed by his briefs, a hard, eager cock awaiting Usher’s attention.

“Usher?”

His attention returned to Jarreth’s amused expression. “Uh, yeah?”

He quirked a dark brow at Usher. “Blanket? Pillow?”

“Right. Give me a minute.”

With his face flaming, Usher made a hasty exit to the spare bedroom for the needed items. His cock pressed urgently against the zipper of his jeans, demanding release. *I’ve got to shake off this crush.*

He returned with a blanket and pillow and placed them on the sofa.

“I’m a light sleeper,” said Jarreth as he shrugged out of his shirt, revealing a pristine white undershirt. “So I’ll keep the fire going tonight.”

At the sight of his skin, muscles, and flexing tendons, Usher glanced away and focused on gathering up their empty beer bottles.

“That’s cool, thanks.” He strode to the kitchen with the bottles clasped between several fingers. “Good night.”

“Good night, Usher. I’ve had a blast tonight.”

In the kitchen, Usher dumped the bottles into the trashcan. He stood leaning against the counter, gripping the edge of it, willing his libido to subside. He swallowed hard. *That*

*man has the body of a Greek god! It's going to be a long, sleepless night.*

He checked the back door's lock and then re-checked the front door, turning off lights as he passed through the house. In his bedroom, he left the door open for Brock, stripped off his clothes save for his boxers and his undershirt, and climbed into bed.

*I don't know why I thought I'd have a chance with him. Then he'll do something that shocks me, and just when I think he might be gay, too, he does something else that blows my theory to Hell. He stared up at the dark ceiling. I have no business chasing the mailman.*

GLASS shattered and something hit the bed. Startled awake, Usher sat up, pain flaring in one shin bone. Cold air blasted into the dark room, along with big snowflakes that glittered in the faint light cast by an outdoor security lamp. Heart flailing, adrenaline singing through his body, Usher glanced around, trying to figure out what had happened. Something heavy lay on the comforter between his ankles. He shifted his feet, but the object pinned the cover to his legs.

Barking permeated the house. A figure appeared in the doorway, followed by the overhead light popping on and Brock bounding into the bedroom. Growling and barking, the dog rushed to the window.

"What the hell?" exclaimed Jarreth, his face a mask of shock and perplexion. He crossed the room to the bed. "Usher, are you all right?"

Finally, his brain began to work, and Usher blinked the last bits of sleep away. "I guess so. My shin hurts, but—" He

stared at a large, dead raccoon. Blood oozed from what remained of its throat and stained the bedcover. Its glassy brown eyes hinted at a gruesome death.

“Holy shit!” Usher kicked his feet free, scrambled out of bed and promptly stepped on a shard of glass. “Shit! Shit!” He hopped on one foot, lost his balance, and fell between the wall and the nightstand. The back of his head whacked the edge of the table. “Damn it to hell,” he hollered, as more adrenaline zinged through him.

Jarreth leapt across the bed. “Damn, what a mess.”

With one hand cradling his head and the other grasping his foot, Usher looked up at his guest, who surveyed the mess on the floor.

“Do you have a pair of slippers?” asked Jarreth.

“Under the edge of the bed.”

Jarreth flopped over to the opposite site of the mattress, grabbed the slippers, and then handed them to Usher. Head still pounding out an agonizing beat, Usher put on his house shoes and hobbled across the glass and around the bed to a chair placed in the corner.

Still barking, Brock stood up on his back legs, his front paws on the sill.

“Calm down, boy!” Usher stood up again and drew in the shutters to block the wind.

“Who the hell would come out in weather like this at—” Jarreth glanced at the clock on the nightstand. “At three fifteen in the morning, to throw a slain raccoon through the window?”

“Probably the same thing that’s been prowling around my farm and now over at Hanna’s too.”

Jarreth looked hard at him. “A wolf with human intelligence?”

Without a word, Usher met his gaze. The tone of Jarreth's voice implied disbelief, and although Usher knew it sounded crazy, what other answer was there?

"It's even more ludicrous for a person to don shoes shaped like paws, rip the lid off a freezer, and kill a filly with fake teeth and claws," Usher stated quietly.

His reply silenced any further comments from Jarreth, who gazed at the glass strewn over the carpet and the foot of the mattress. Slowly, he shifted his attention to the raccoon's mutilated body.

"Wait." He leaned over and peered at the carcass. "It looks like something is in its mouth."

"Like...?"

"I don't know." Jarreth tugged on something white, and withdrew a piece of wadded paper. He smoothed it out. "It says 'you're dead' in letters cut out of a something with glossy print pages, maybe a magazine."

Gaping at him, Usher said, "You're kidding."

Jarreth held it up for him to see.

"What the hell have I done?" He shook his head. "I mind my own business, help out at The Cannonball once in a while, and try to treat everyone like I want to be treated."

"Usher, when you're dealing with a nutcase, you don't necessarily have to do something to them to set him or her off." Standing, Jarreth patted Brock and then pointed to the doorway. With a disgruntled snort, the dog obeyed his hand signal and moved to sit just outside the bedroom.

Surprised, Usher said, "How did you do that? Brock seldom obeys anyone but me."

"I just have a way with dogs," Jarreth said. "Mom has a pair of Schnauzers, and they're the same way with me." He

shrugged. “Anyway, one of my cousins in Miami is studying for a career in behavioral sciences. He once told me that something as simple as the way a woman wears her hair or just the inflection of someone’s voice can flip the murder switch in a deranged mind.”

“Lovely. That makes me want to run right out and meet new people.”

Laughing, Jarreth crossed the room to the door. “In this case, my best bet is that someone is just trying to scare you.” He stopped in the doorway. “Where’s your first aid kit?”

“In the bathroom cupboard, on the top shelf.”

“Sit tight. First I’ll take a look at that cut, and then I’ll find the broom and dust pan to start cleaning up the mess.”

Usher sighed. “Yeah, and we’ll have to find something to put over the window too. The shutters aren’t going to keep out the cold and moisture for long.”

“One thing at a time.”

“While you’re in the kitchen—” Usher cringed as pain radiated from his foot and up along his nerve endings. “Bring the digital camera sitting on top of the fridge. I’ll need to take pictures of the broken window for the insurance company, and probably the authorities as well.”

Jarreth offered him a reassuring smile. “I’ll be right back.”

## Chapter Six

USHER managed two more hours of fitful sleep, but he finally gave up and rose, dressing in fresh clothes. He managed to gingerly pull a tube sock over his injured foot, but if travel were possible later that morning, he'd have to wear something on his foot that didn't constrict it.

The aroma of something baking tantalized his nose as he hobbled down the hall and paused at the living room threshold. An intense fire snapped in the fireplace, the flames licking over fresh logs stacked neatly on the grate. The sofa had been vacated, and the blankets lay folded at one end, on top of the pillow.

*Either Jarreth's an early riser, or he didn't sleep any better than I did.*

With pain and soreness plaguing his foot, Usher limped through the house and found Jarreth and Brock in the kitchen. The dog jumped up from his usual spot and padded over to nuzzle Usher for petting and scratching.

"Morning, pal," said Usher. He straightened and looked at Jarreth. The start of a dark beard shadowed the lower half of his face, and his slightly rumpled hair lent him a sexy, come-hither look. Usher's groin awakened, but he ignored it. He smiled and said, "You're up early."

"Hey." His guest favored him with a big grin. "How'd you sleep for the rest of the night?"

"Lousy."

Jarreth chuckled as he stood. “Me too. I decided I’d make some coffee, and, since I rummaged through your cupboards and found a couple boxes of blueberry Jiffy mix, I stirred them up and they’re in the oven.”

“Thanks. Sounds great!”

“How does the foot feel?”

Usher grimaced. “I had no idea the bottom of the foot was so damn sensitive. It hurts like a son of a bitch!”

“Well, as deep as that cut is, I think I should drive you into Stone Trail so someone at the clinic can take a look at it.” Opening the oven, Jarreth nodded approvingly and then slipped an oven mitt on one hand. “I did the best I could to draw the wound shut with what was in the first aid kit, but I really think that cut needs stitches.” He withdrew a large tray of golden muffins. “Besides, you don’t want infection to settle in it and cause more problems.”

Usher half walked, half shuffled to the back door and opened it. “I guess you’re right, but it doesn’t look like the roads will be passable. There’s about two inches of ice on everything outside.”

“We’ll give the township time to come through with salt and cinders first. Then we’ll decide what to do.” Quiet followed, and then Jarreth added, “Oh, by the way, I put the raccoon in a garbage bag and placed it on the back porch.”

“Thanks.” Usher’s gaze landed on the black mound on the edge of the porch. *Who could be so pissed off at me they would do such a thing?*

The back lawn looked like it lay under a layer of sprayed-on glass. Although the ice caused a hardship on people and made the roads treacherous, Usher couldn’t help admiring its beauty.

“Luckily your land line hasn’t gone out,” Jarreth commented behind him.

“That’s surprising. The phones are usually the first things to go when we have these ice storms.”

After he shut the door, Usher hobbled to the table and sat in the chair Jarreth pulled out for him. His guest placed a bowl of muffins on the tabletop along with a tub of butter and a cup of steaming coffee.

“Wow, this is really nice,” said Usher. “Do you usually cook like this?”

“I love to cook, but since Mom doesn’t eat much, and there’s no sense in making a nice meal for just me, I don’t get to enjoy doing much in the kitchen anymore.” He shot Usher another grin that set his heart into high gear. “You’ll have to come over sometime and let me whip up a meal that will make your taste buds scream with pleasure.”

Reaching for a muffin, Usher paused with his hand in midair. The words “scream with pleasure” seemed to echo in his mind. His cock jumped to attention again. He shifted his position.

“I’m not bragging,” Jarreth continued, “so I hope you don’t take it that way. I’ve always had a keen sense of how to prepare foods, even making my own recipes. Mom always said I should’ve gone to culinary school instead of being a postal carrier.”

“Why don’t you?” With his attention focused on breakfast instead of the pulsing behind his zipper, Usher picked up a butter knife. “You’re still young, and I hear that chefs are needed all over the world.”

“I’ve thought about it, but with Mom’s condition, the future’s a bit uncertain.” A sad chuckle escaped Jarreth.

“Besides, I have Mom on my health insurance plan, so I have to keep the job for a while. Her medical coverage only pays a small percentage of her needs.”

The conversation dwindled, and Usher sat eating in silence as he contemplated Jarreth’s dilemma. *Jarreth’s one hell of a man for putting his mother’s needs before his. Nowadays not many people would do that for a parent.* As he ate, he stole glances at the man sitting across from him. Not only was Jarreth handsome and mysterious, but he was also a strong person. He’d have to be to care for his mother like he was, and then there was the way he’d handled the upset during the night. He’d taken the matter in stride, as if he dealt with dead raccoons flying through plate-glass windows every day. Jarreth had patched his foot, helped him clean up the glass, and pounded nails into the window frame as Usher had held the plastic over it as tightly as he could.

*He’s a definite keeper—* Usher shoved the thought aside. He had no business entertaining any thoughts of a relationship with the man. Jarreth hadn’t show any signs of interest beyond pure friendship.

The phone jangled. Startled, Usher sloshed coffee out of his cup.

A warm chuckle escaped Jarreth as he stood. “I’ll get that.” He ripped a paper towel from the dispenser on the counter and passed it to Usher. “Clean up your mess.” He chuckled harder and moved to the phone. “Hello?”

Heat bathed Usher’s cheeks. *I am such an idiot! I’ve got to keep my mind on more important matters, like the safety of my horses and finding out who or what this stalker is.* He mopped up the spilled brew and then reached for the carafe on the battery-operated hotplate.

“Yeah, he’s sitting right here. Hang on.” Jarreth handed Usher the handset. “It’s your neighbor.”

“Hanna?” Usher spoke into the phone.

“Usher, are you doing okay over there?”

“A friend of mine got caught here last night, so we’ve kept a fire going in the fireplace, and so far the phone line seems to be holding up. However, we both have cells, should we need them.” He contemplated telling his neighbor what had happened last night, but he decided not to since it would only worry Hanna more. “There’s no need to worry yourself, honey. We’re fine.”

“Good. I was worried about you,” said Hanna, her voice tinged with concern. “I thought I’d pass along some good news. A report went out on my scanner that the county and townships should have the roads treated by noon. It seems this side of the mountain was hit the hardest by the storm, so road crews are concentrating on our roads first.”

“That is good news,” he said. “Was everything quiet over there last night?”

“Yes, thank God.”

“Figured it would be, with the nasty weather.”

“Keep in touch, darlin’.”

“I will.”

The line clicked, and Usher handed the phone back to Jarreth.

“Your neighbor doing okay?”

“Yeah,” said Usher, “she’s fine. I just wish I could say the same for here.” He sighed and waited as Jarreth joined him at the table again. “Hanna said we should be able to drive to

Stone Trail by noon or after. Crews are focusing on this side of the mountain.”

“That’s a relief!” Nodding, Jarreth grabbed another muffin and sliced it in half. “I need to get home and check on Mom. I realize the nurse would’ve called if there had been any problems, but I’ll feel better once I check on her myself.”

At the thought of Jarreth leaving him, a pang of loneliness sliced through Usher’s heart. Sighing, he sipped from his mug.

AFTER Usher let Brock out one more time, he called him back inside, shut the fire down in the hearth, and made sure the back door and all the windows were secure. He locked the front entrance behind him as Jarreth waited on the stoop.

“Hey,” Usher said, “thanks again for breakfast and for helping me feed the horses this morning. It would have taken me twice as long to do it limping around like this.”

“No problem. I actually enjoyed it. Horses are beautiful creatures.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind going to the police station with me?”

Jarreth shook his head. “It’s fine. If I back up your story, Sheriff Kinston should take the report more seriously. Maybe if he calls the game warden it will light a fire under the guy’s ass.”

Laughter burst from Usher. “Maybe, but I doubt it.”

“Just drive slowly,” said Jarreth. “The ice is still melting, and if you have to use your bum foot to hit the brakes suddenly, it’s going to—”

“It’s okay, really.”

Jarreth's fretting over him made Usher uncomfortable. He liked the attention, but it also showed him how much Jarreth was off limits to him.

Usher stepped past him, but his foot connected with a spot that hadn't been de-iced. He slipped, spun around, and grabbed for the support pole at the top of the steps. Missing the pole, he snatched for the next best thing he could find—Jarreth's coat front.

"Shit!" he hollered as he fell backward, yanking Jarreth off the porch with him.

"Oh, hell!" Jarreth yelled.

Usher's backside connected with the icy crust covering the snowy lawn. The resulting crack sounded like glass shattering. The air whooshed out of him. Snow bloomed around his head. Once the cold wetness made contact with his face, it took Usher's breath away. He gasped, swiping at his cheeks and nose like a madman, but Jarreth fell on top of him, knocking more snow into his face and pushing more air out of his lungs too.

"Umph!" Usher wheezed for air and thrashed under Jarreth's weight.

"Damn! Are you all right, Usher?" Jarreth raised up on one arm. He wiped snow and small chunks of ice from Usher's face. "Usher?"

Gasping for breath, Usher managed to suck air into his lungs. Finally, he looked up into his friend's eyes and nodded. "Yeah, I'm okay. The fall knocked the wind out of me, and the snow in my face took what was left of it."

Laughter bubbled out of Jarreth. "Man, I'm glad you're not hurt, but you should see how you look!" He laughed harder. "Damn, you're a sight!"

For a moment Usher just lay there and blinked up at him. *What the hell does he think is so funny about—* The hilarity of the situation suddenly hit him, and Usher began chuckling. His chuckles transformed into guffaws, and within seconds he was laughing so hard his stomach hurt.

“You have—” Jarreth snorted with mirth. “Chunks of ice stuck to the edges of your hat.” The strength of his arm gave out, and he fell forward. “Damn, sorry, man. I haven’t laughed this hard in a long time.” He cracked up again. “All the snow has melted on your face. It looks like someone threw a bucket of water at you!” In an attempt to rein in his laughter, he snorted again and failed miserably.

Too weak to do anything but lay there on the freezing ground, Usher hooted and laughed until he thought his ribs would snap. It felt great to laugh, to relieve stress and to share it with someone.

Finally, he managed to calm down, and Jarreth seemed to gather the strength to lever himself on his forearms and get up, but as he pushed himself up, his hips ground against Usher’s. A startled sound fled Usher’s lips, and fire shot straight to his cock. His gaze met Jarreth’s. There, he saw something dark and wild pass through his friend’s eyes that left Usher confused, worried, and even more aroused.

As Jarreth pushed his torso further away from Usher’s, it drove their hips tighter together. Usher sucked in a needy breath, and closed his eyes for a moment as arrows of desire flew through his body. They wore layers of clothes, but Usher was certain he felt something hard and unyielding pressed against his cock.

He glanced up into Jarreth’s eyes again, but this time the man wore an irritated expression. Bewildered, Usher started to say something, but Jarreth beat him to it.

“Sorry, Usher. I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable, but my feet—” He finally rolled to the side, over the snow pile and into the shoveled path. “Were tangled up in the hedge by the steps.” He stood and held one gloved hand out to him. “Did I hurt you when I landed on top of you?”

Usher accepted Jarreth’s help and allowed him to haul him to his feet. “N-no. I’m f-fine, really.” He tested his weight on his injured foot. *Damn it, stop stammering. He’s not interested, so quit making it out to be more than it is.* He sneaked a glance at Jarreth, who seemed to find something across the lawn more interesting. *His cheeks are red, but that’s probably just from the cold, or laughing so hard... right?*

“Well—” Jarreth motioned for Usher to follow him. “Let’s get going. We need to get to the sheriff’s station before it gets much later.” His gaze briefly met Usher’s before skittering away.

As he hobbled along behind Jarreth, disappointment and worry smothered Usher’s heart. Somehow he’d offended Jarreth, and worse, he might have even alienated him.

*Shit! He probably felt how hard my cock got, and now that he knows how attracted I am to him, he must feel really uncomfortable about it.*

“Did you remember to bring your camera?” Jarreth asked over his shoulder.

“Sure did.”

“Hopefully the pictures of everything will help convince the sheriff to look into this matter.” Reaching his truck, Jarreth banged on the handle, knocking the ice free so he could open the door. “You’re sure you’re okay to drive with your hurt foot?”

Usher paused next to him and noted that Jarreth wouldn’t meet his gaze. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“I’ll drive slowly, then.” He climbed into the driver’s seat and started the engine. “I’m going to let the motor warm up and then we can be on our way.” Without another glance in his direction, Jarreth shut the door. All Usher could see through the thick cover of ice were muted colors.

With care, Usher limped between his Bronco and Jarreth’s pickup. He rounded the front end, reached the driver’s door, and smashed the ice off the handle on his driver’s door too. Once he was inside and had the truck’s engine idling, Usher stared at the dashboard, wishing he’d never slipped and fallen off the porch. Somehow he’d upset Jarreth, and now Usher would bet money he’d lost his newfound friend.

## Chapter Seven

THE township had salted and cindered the road heavily. With the sun's aid, the asphalt was mostly bare, but the few places where the wind kissed the pavement with its cold breath proved the most treacherous areas to navigate. Usher's usual fifteen-minute trip took twice the time, but he was thankful that the road crews had done such a great job.

In Stone Trail, business owners tossed salt on sidewalks and steps as employees used flat-edged shovels to remove the loosened and melting ice for customers who were beginning to venture out. A salt truck pattered through the intersection, followed by a rusty pickup and two all-wheel-drive cars. Vehicles packed the parking lot of the small Buy and Bag Grocery Store. Noting that there wasn't a parking spot left in the grocer's lot, Usher sensed more bad weather on the way and made a mental note to get the latest weather report.

He drove down Main Street and pulled into the small lot adjacent to Stone Trail's county sheriff's office. Jarreth parked his Dodge on the opposite end and met him at the building's side entrance.

Inside, toasty air wrapped around them, and the scent of pine air freshener overpowered the office.

A woman greeted them from behind a small counter. "Well, hello there, Usher, Jarreth. What brings you two out after the ice storm?"

“Mable.” Usher smiled. “It’s nice to see you. I’m afraid I’ve had some problems out at my horse farm and need to report them. Is the sheriff in his office?”

Mable shook her graying head. “I’m afraid with all the traffic accidents and emergencies caused by the storm that every available person is out on a call somewhere today.”

A knot of disappointment and frustration formed in Usher’s chest. *Great, first the game warden won’t return my calls, and now the sheriff’s out on calls. By the time he gets to my report, the trail will be cold.*

She reached for something under the counter and then placed a form on the countertop. “If you want to fill out a report, I’ll make sure Sheriff Kingston gets it.”

“I have pictures to go with it,” Usher said, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice.

“Let me have the memory stick for a moment and I’ll make copies of the photos.” She held out one hand, as her friendly eyes met his. “Which ones am I looking for?”

“Pictures of a dead raccoon, a note, and the damage done to a bedroom window.” Usher passed Mable his camera and then picked up a pen and began writing out his report.

“I’ll be right back,” Mable answered.

As Usher filled in his name and address, the phone rang in a back office, followed by the chirp of another one behind the counter. The faint rumble of another salt truck permeated the building. A couple of feet to his left, Jarreth stood quietly.

Pausing, Usher pushed the form across the Formica to Jarreth and set the pen next to it. “There’s no need for you to wait around here.” He lowered his voice. “By the time Sheriff Kingston gets to my report, it’ll be old news, so I doubt anyone will even look into the incident.”

“But, Usher, you need to—”

Usher shook his head adamantly. “Don’t worry about it. If you want to go ahead and put your contact information down and sign on the witness line, you can go on home and take care of Una.”

For the first time since finding themselves torso to torso and hip to hip on the snow, Jarreth met his gaze. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I can tell you’re getting worried about your mom.”

Quickly, Jarreth filled out his section of the report and slid it back to Usher. “Thanks, Usher. And thank you for letting me stay at your place last night. I’m sorry I can’t be of more help with this, though.”

“You’ve done more for me than anyone else has,” Usher replied as warmth flooded his cheeks. *Man, is that ever a loaded reply!* He concentrated on the form and willed the fire to fade from his face. “I hope we can hang out together again sometime.”

“You bet.” Jarreth patted Usher on the shoulder and strode to the door. “See you later.”

*A friendly pat on the shoulder is a sure sign of either being just friends or a final goodbye.* With a heavy sigh, Usher began writing his testimony of what had occurred that night.

LATER, Usher pulled into the clinic’s parking lot, only to find it closed.

“Shit!” He rested his forehead against the steering wheel and sat that way for a minute. At a loss on how to handle

everything, he gritted his teeth as pain pulsed in the arch of his foot.

*Maybe Doc Evirgrew's available. He certainly knows how to stitch up wounds.*

Usher put the Bronco in gear, backed out of the lot, and drove across town to the veterinarian's office. There, he discovered the vet just coming out of the kennel, carrying a stack of aluminum pet dishes.

"Usher!" Doc Evirgrew called as Usher slammed the driver's door. "What has brought you out here today? Something wrong with one of the horses?"

Limping across the cinder-strewn lot, Usher hollered back, "No, the horses are fine, Doc. However, I'm not." He laughed at the irony of his last comment. "Regardless, I need to discuss something with you."

The vet approached him, his breath blooming around his head in white puffs. "Let me put these pans in the wash room, and we'll go into the house."

Following him into the clinic attached to the doctor's house, Usher inhaled the familiar scents of antiseptic, bleach, cedar bedding, and horse liniment. Even as a kid, Usher had always felt at home in the veterinarian's kitchen, done in honey-colored wood, white cabinets trimmed with gold paint, and marbled Formica counter tops. It was a kitchen designed for a happy family, but Doc had been single his entire life.

Doc Evirgrew placed the pans in a big washbasin, and then motioned for Usher to follow him through the connecting breezeway and into his dwelling. "So what can I help you with today?" he asked as he held the door open for Usher to pass through.

“First, I need some medical attention,” Usher began. “The damn clinic is shut down because of the weather. Also, I wanted to ask you some questions about wolves.”

“Wolves?” The vet studied him with keen gray eyes, and his bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows knitted. Doc swore under his breath and pointed to a kitchen chair. “Did one attack and hurt you?”

“No, a wolf didn’t attack me,” Usher replied. “There was a problem at my place last night and a window was broken. I stepped on a shard of glass, and my foot is killing me.”

“Take a load off, followed by the boot and sock on the injured foot.” Doc shuffled over to a coffeemaker. “Want a cup of joe?”

“Sounds good,” Usher replied. “I hope it’s strong.”

“There’s no coffee worth drinking other than black and strong.” The vet chuckled and poured him a cup. He then hurried back to the clinic only to return with medical supplies that he laid out on the tabletop. He glanced at Usher as he opened a bottle of alcohol. “Spill it, son. Start with what happened last night.”

As Doc examined his foot, Usher explained the incident the night before, and then relayed the odd happenings around his farm as well as the minor problems over at Hanna Tope’s.

Doc filled a syringe with a clear liquid. “This is going to pinch—unless you’d rather not have any painkiller. Although the wound needs several stitches, it’s also starting to seal, so before I start stitching it I’m going to have to make sure nothing’s in it that might cause infection.” He paused and looked at Usher, waiting for a reply. “When I go poking about in that wound, it’s going to hurt like a son of a bitch.”

Usher glanced down at his snow boot and his blood-spotted sock on the floor. "Painkiller, please," he said. "My foot is already thumping like a drum."

Usher could administer shots to his horses and not bat an eye at it, but having it done to him was an entirely different matter. He closed his eyes as the needle neared his foot.

"Since your foot is already in pain," said Doc, "this will pinch more than usual, so for God's sake, son, don't jump."

The cold, piercing pinch skewered Usher's foot, but he gritted his teeth, and as quickly as it started, the pinch was gone. Within a couple of minutes the pain began to subside, and Usher relaxed.

"Okay," said Doc. "I'm going to start stitching." He began threading the curved stainless-steel needle through the flesh of Usher's foot. "Son, I've known you since you started kindergarten. Your parents were wonderful people, God rest their souls, and your sister is a good woman, but your family isn't around anymore to protect you from the slings and arrows thrown by folks around here." Doc knotted the surgical thread and then used a small pair of scissors to cut the thread near the knot. "You've probably already suspected why the game warden won't answer your calls, so what do you feel your options are?"

Usher smiled. Doc was always one to go straight to the heart of a matter.

"I really don't have any at this point."

"Exactly." The vet gently pressed a bandage on the wound and wrapped a length of gauze around Usher's foot to hold it in place. "You're going to have to sit tight, watch your back, and then waylay anyone who jumps you or hurts your horses. Until you have something to prove your case, no one will take you

seriously. Don't shoot anyone unless they break into your home, but if you're forced to shoot someone outside, drag the fucker into the house, bash the door in, and knock some things around to make it look like there was a scuffle." Doc Evirgrew used a fastener to secure the gauze. He put the rest of the roll on the tabletop and then met Usher's gaze. "The authorities, including the game warden, will blame the filly's death on wolves or coyotes, and the winter has been a harsh one and January's weather forecast looks bleak. Folks will claim that predators are looking for easy kills because game is scarce. Your insurance company will pay for the filly, and the rest will be swept under the rug."

Usher questioned, "What about the dead raccoon and the threatening note?"

"Without any substantial clues, Sheriff Kingston will probably say some troubled teenagers did it to scare the gay guy who owns the horse farm."

"But Hanna will back me up," Usher insisted, his anger mounting. "Surely the authorities will listen to her side."

Doc Evirgrew nodded as he returned items to the first-aid kit and a plastic container. "Sure they will, but they'll insist she's a widowed woman, so she's afraid to be alone at the farm and prone to imagining things or making them seem worse than they really are."

"This is such bullshit," Usher snapped.

"Son, you knew all this before you came here to see me today, but you needed to bend an ear that's been listening to your family problems for the past thirty years." The veterinarian sat back in his chair. "What is it you really want to know?"

Usher met the man's kind gaze. Old Doc Evirgrew was like a favorite uncle who always came to Sunday dinners and lavished the kids with candy and toys. The man often knew Usher's heart better than he did.

He sighed, and without flinching asked, "Do you believe it's possible for an animal to have human intelligence?"

Doc didn't even blink. "Why not? During my years as a veterinarian, I've seen so many unusual animals, their unexplainable behavior, and even a few who seemed to possess a weird, paranormal sense of things. I'm not one to dismiss something as coincidence. Animals can predict earthquakes and tornadoes. Pets have been known to sense bad things about to happen to their masters, and some animals are so smart it's eerie. God works in mysterious ways—your mama always told you that."

Usher chuckled. Doc always had a way of helping him see things in an objective light, and as a result, Usher's mood would lift and his heart would lighten.

"I got to admit, Doc, that I'm a little scared." He picked up his sock and eased it over his foot. "Those tracks I've been finding are enormous and the impressions are deep. Whatever this animal is, I sense it has an ax to grind with me." Once he had his sock on, Usher straightened his pant leg and met Doc's eyes again. "I also get the sensation that Hanna is being threatened because she's a good friend. I don't know how to fight something I can't identify."

"You said you wanted to talk about wolves," the Doc pressed.

"What can you tell me about their habits?"

Doc leaned on the table and thought for a moment. “Well, males are bigger than females, and they have a huge territory that can be several miles wide.”

“How big can a wolf get?”

“Depends on the species. The federal wildlife organizations say there are no timber wolves or gray wolves in the area, but I beg to differ. I’ve seen both on this mountain and so have other people. Red wolves are indigenous to the area, but they’re much smaller than their cousins. The bigger male wolves can be two hundred pounds or more if they’re eating well.”

“How do they walk?” asked Usher.

Doc frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Do their back feet step into their front feet when they walk?”

“Yes. Their back foot will slightly overlap the print of the front paw, so the track can sometimes look larger than what it really is.”

Usher pondered the facts he’d gleaned. *So, the creature isn’t walking on its hind legs, but that means... what does that mean?*

“Usher? What’s wrong?”

“Are they known to break into freezers that they could reach?”

Puzzled, Doc shook his head and swept spilled sugar across the tabletop with one hand and into the other. “No, wolves wouldn’t do something like that. If you left the filly wrapped in plastic on the porch, I could see one dragging it off into the woods as easy vittles, but opening a latch and ripping a lid off to carry it away without a sign of where it could’ve gone isn’t something an animal would do.”

“So you think it’s someone pretending to be a wild animal to scare me?”

“That would be my first guess, yes.”

The sound of a vehicle pulling in behind the clinic drew Usher’s attention.

Doc looked up, rose, and brushed the sugar from his palm and into the sink. “Speaking of the sheriff, that’s him now.” He gazed through the kitchen window. “Ah, look. There’s the game warden pulling in behind him.” He moved to the coat rack by the door. “Wait here for a few minutes, then when I put my back to the house, that’ll be the sign for you to hobble on out.”

Usher laughed. “Sure thing, Doc.”

Once his elder friend had gone outside, Usher slipped his bandaged foot into his boot and loosely tied the laces. He donned his coat, hat, and gloves and quietly limped out into the clinic where he could watch through one of the windows. Sheriff Kingston stepped out of the SUV and greeted Doc with a handshake. Ramsey, the game warden, slammed the door of his truck and strode with purpose toward the men.

Something about the wildlife official seemed slightly familiar, but he couldn’t nail it down. *Man, it’s like I should know that guy.* He frowned, searching all his mental banks. *I don’t know him, but it seems like....* He shrugged the feeling away as Doc turned his back to the house. *Well, here goes. Now maybe I can get some help with my nightly visitor.*

## Chapter Eight

USHER breathed deeply and turned the door handle, pushing out into the cold air. Both the sheriff and Game Warden Ramsey turned toward the noise of the opening door. A look of resignation crossed the sheriff's face, but Ramsey wore one of irritation.

*What the fuck's his problem?* Usher forced a polite smile.

Turning as if he'd just heard him, Doc said, "Oh, there he is. Usher, come on over here and tell the sheriff and Mr. Ramsey about what's been going on out at your farm."

Sheriff Kingston fished in his coat pocket and drew out a pad and a pen. "I hear you have someone messing with your horses and causing damage."

Quickly, Usher relayed the incidents of the past few nights. He turned his gaze to the game warden and added, "Plus, I've called your office several times, Mr. Ramsey." He started to repeat what he'd heard in the restroom but decided to play it cool instead. "I realize you're busy with the poaching problem in these parts, but I overheard a couple of your staff at The Cannonball who said you didn't want to come out this way because it's too far to drive."

Surprise registered on the man's face. "Is that so? Do you happen to know their names?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I'd never seen them before. I just overheard them talking at the bar about their jobs and all the poaching calls the office had been receiving."

On the other side of Kingston and Ramsey, the doc disguised his grin and looked away.

As Usher waited for one of the officials to reply, an icy wind whipped across the parking lot.

“Damn,” the sheriff muttered, shivering. He stuck his pad and pen back in his coat. “I can tell the weather report is on the money for tonight. We’re supposed to get four to six inches of snow on top of this ice.”

The startled expression on Ramsey’s face slowly morphed into one of keen interest mixed with suspicion. “So, you don’t have the filly’s body anymore, correct?”

“No,” Usher answered. “Like I said, who or whatever has been prowling my farm ripped the lid off the freezer and took the corpse.”

“I think you’ve got some teenagers, or just some idiot snowed in with boredom who’s picking on you for entertainment purposes,” said Ramsey. His gaze hardened as if he were daring Usher to argue.

“Since you already filed a report at the station,” Sheriff Kingston said, “I don’t see any need to go out to your place to investigate.” He flipped his coat collar up to ward off the wind. “I hate to say it, but I agree with Ramsey, son. I think someone’s just trying to rattle your cage. Youngsters in these parts do all sorts of crazy things for fun, especially when the winter has been so bad, making travel difficult. These kids can’t go to the neighboring town to mess around at the mall, and our little cinema only gets movies that have already been out for a couple of months.”

Doc tossed the sheriff a skeptical look and huffed into his bare hands, as if warming them.

Usher struggled to keep the frustration out of his voice. "But what about the dead filly?"

"Just because you saw a wolf in your backyard—and that's if it wasn't someone's German Shepherd, or a Husky mix—doesn't mean it killed the filly." Ramsey shrugged. "I know it's hard to hear, but nowadays a lot of kills are caused by bored kids and incompetent and dangerous hunters, who should never be permitted to own a gun, or any other weapon for that matter. They're the kind of hunters that give the ones who follow the laws, regulations, and safety rules a bad name."

"I'm sorry," said Usher with conviction, "but I think there's more to this problem than meets the eye."

"That's quite possible," Kingston said, nodding, "but until we have irrefutable proof, there isn't a lot myself or Ramsey can do."

The cool smile on the game warden's face sent a pang of fury through Usher. He fought the urge to paste him right in the mouth.

"If another one of my horses is killed, I'm going to raise seven kinds of hell." Anger flowed through Usher, and despite the biting wind, he began to sweat in his coat. "The insurance company will start asking questions and won't pay up pending an investigation. My horses are my livelihood."

"I understand that, son." The sheriff turned to the doc. "Will you call the Mollivans and let them know we found their coon hounds and brought them here? The roads out the Mollivans' way haven't been treated yet."

"No problem," said Doc. "Their dogs are patients here."

"Let me open the boxes on my truck, Doc." Ramsey spun on his heel and hurried to his vehicle.

“Look, son,” said Kingston to Usher, “I know you’re frustrated and worried, but look at it from our standpoint. The weather is treacherous and it destroys any signs of who has been slinking around your farm, including tracks. A note with a dead raccoon doesn’t provide any real clues, but it delivered a good scare.” He patted Usher on the shoulder. “And with the snow that’s due to hit this region over the next few days, I doubt you’ll have any more problems. It’ll be too nasty for anyone to go out.”

Momentarily defeated, Usher sighed and met the sheriff’s gaze. “I guess.”

“If anything else should happen, call my office. At least now you’ve already filed a report of it, right?”

He nodded.

“And since I work with the game warden, I’ll forward any other reports you might file, on to his office. That way the dispatcher will take them more seriously.” He patted Usher’s shoulder harder. “How’s that sound, son?”

Finally, Usher sighed with a relief. “That does make me feel a little better.”

“Good.”

“I’ll take a look at the pictures and your report when I get back to the office.”

“Thanks, Sheriff.”

“No problem.” Kingston nodded and ambled to his SUV. “Doc, I’ll be seeing you.”

The doc waved as he walked into the kennel leading one coonhound as Ramsey led the other.

As the sheriff left, Usher shuffled to his Bronco. *I hope the sheriff didn’t feed me a line of bullshit.* He glanced over his shoulder at the kennel door banging shut behind the game

warden. *As for Ramsey, I don't like him one bit, but I sure wish I knew why he seems so familiar.*

He drove out of the parking lot. Turning on the radio, he caught the first part of a weather report that echoed the sheriff's forecast.

*Wonderful. It'll probably be days before I see Jarreth again... if he'll even talk to me again after what happened this afternoon.*

With a glum feeling in his gut, Usher carefully navigated the roads home.

USHER spent the day cleaning house. After he stepped on a small glass splinter, he ran the vacuum again in the bedroom for several minutes. Brock dozed in the kitchen until Usher finished and put the Dyson in the hall closet.

He fed his pet, filled the dog's bowl with fresh water, and then made a quick call to Hanna. With all well on his friend's farm, he opened the freezer door and stared at its contents.

Several TV dinners lined the left side of the ice box. Frozen packs of hamburger, sausage and small foam containers of chicken filled the other side. What should he fix for his dinner? The Crockpot meal Jarreth had shared with him last night was nearly gone. Usher sighed and reached for a frozen meatloaf dinner, tossing it on the counter. The crack of it against the Formica top startled Brock out of sleep. The dog stared at him with a what-the-fuck look before snorting and stretching out across the throw rug in front of the stove.

*I've always been lonely, but I never realized how much until Jarreth spent the night.* Usher groaned aloud with the realization and moved over to the coffeemaker. There, he began

setting up the machine to brew a fresh pot. Reaching for the can of coffee in the cabinet, Usher wished Zander was still with him. *Damn, it's been eight years since losing you, baby. It's no wonder I'm so lonesome. I miss you so much.*

He inhaled a shaky breath and finished spooning coffee grounds into the filter, then added an extra spoon and a half to make it stronger, which was how he really liked it. He sensed a sleepless night ahead of him, so he might as well enjoy his coffee.

*It's not like I have anyone to share it with anyway.*

Self-pity wasn't something Usher liked, so he shook off the feelings and thoughts. Looking at Brock, he said, "Come on, boy. Let's go outside and get some fresh air. When we get back, the coffee will be ready."

The dog scrambled to his feet, and waited eagerly as Usher stepped into his boots and donned the rest of his warm winter gear. He opened the back door, letting Brock out first, and then followed his pet out onto the porch scattered with rock salt.

Dusk had begun to settle around the farm. Usher didn't care for cold weather much, but the one thing he hated about wintertime the most was how the daylight faded so quickly. He pushed the cuff of his coat back from his glove and looked at his wristwatch.

"Might as well feed the horses for the night, pal. I'm only twenty minutes early for feeding time. Then we can hole up in the house by the fire and watch a movie. How's that sound?"

Brock let out a yip as if to say it sounded like a great way to spend his doggy evening. The dog bounded into the smooth, untouched portion of the backyard and pierced the icy crust with his nose. He snuffled in the hole he'd created and then

raised his head to look back at Usher, his muzzle sparkling with snow as if he'd put it in a white-frosted cake.

Usher laughed, his mood lightening. "Sometimes you're such a puppy."

Brock woofed softly and charged across the snow and into the path leading around the backside of the stable, his dark red fur flowing with his graceful movements.

"Wait for me. I can't walk very fast with this bum foot," Usher called to his pet.

Thirty minutes later, the horses were fed scoops of grain with fresh water in their pails and hay in the feeders. Usher hobbled around the stable, locking the doors and double-checking the windows. He'd discovered a message on the office answering machine from someone wanting to buy two young horses for their teenage daughters, so Usher would return the person's call first thing tomorrow morning. With his spirits bolstered, he closed and locked the office and then paused to lock that door behind him for the night too.

He patted his thigh. "Come on, Brock," he yelled to the dog, sitting at the corner of the stable. "Brock?"

The dog barely glanced at him before returning his attention to something behind the barn.

Suddenly alert, Usher limped along the path that encircled the stable and peeked around the corner over Brock's head.

Darkness shrouded the back paddocks, but a break in the cloud cover allowed the moon to illuminate the landscape for a few seconds. There, at the edge of the woods, sat a wolf. The animal regarded them with large, round eyes reflecting yellow-white in the moonshine.

*Is that the same wolf I saw in the backyard the other night?* He squinted at it, but he couldn't see anything other than the shape of its body and its eerie eyes.

A sense of vulnerability hit Usher. Should the animal attack, Usher wouldn't be able to run with stitches in his foot.

"Let's go inside, boy," he whispered.

Brock whined.

"Come on." He nudged the dog with the toe of his boot.

Reluctantly, Brock stood and trailed Usher to the path that wound to the front of the house.

*I'll go in the front door.* Usher shuffled to the right, glancing over his shoulder toward the area where the wolf had been sitting. Now, with the moon's glow hidden, inkiness swallowed the landscape. *Aw, hell. That wolf could be slinking around to jump us.* He limped faster, the snow squeaking loudly beneath his weight, and made it over the shoveled path to the porch steps and up to the stoop.

Once he opened the door, he pushed through and turned to shut it, but Brock stood on the tiny porch wagging his tail and looking at him.

"Get in here, boy."

Brock whined.

"What's wrong?"

The dog whimpered and looked over at the path that curved around the house.

Usher gripped the dog's collar and dragged him through the door. "Now isn't the time to decide you want to make friends with your canine cousin. Get in here." He shut the door and locked it. "What the hell has gotten into you?"

With a heavy sigh, Brock padded into the living room.

Usher hurried down the hall and hung his gear by the back door so he'd have it there to go out for firewood. He set his boots on newspapers to drip and then turned and poured himself a cup of coffee before throwing the TV dinner into the microwave.

Once the dinner was ready, Usher sat at the table with it. He gazed at the spot Jarreth had once occupied. *Man, I wish you were here right now.* He poked at the meatloaf steaming in the plastic tray. *I could call him, couldn't I? Just see how he's doing and ask about his mom....* Surely such a call would be okay, and he'd also be able to tell if Jarreth was upset with him.

With his mind made up, Usher rose to retrieve the phone. He dug Jarreth's number out of his wallet, unfolded the slip of paper, and punched in the digits.

Two rings later, a woman answered the call. "Malloray residence."

"Hi. Could I speak to Jarreth, please?"

"He's not here right now," the woman answered. "May I take a message?"

Usher almost stated his name, but decided against it. "No, that's okay. I'll call back some other time. Thanks."

He hung up and then sat at the table again.

*That must've been the night nurse, and Jarreth's probably at The Cannonball enjoying a few drinks. I hope he hasn't met someone else and....* Uncertain what to think, Usher ate his meal, but it was tasteless. *Why am I worrying about it? What happened today rattled the guy so badly I know he's not gay.* He cleaned up his mess, poured another cup of coffee, and started toward the living room when Brock trotted out and passed him to sit and whine at the door.

“Dammit, Brock.” Irritated, Usher set his cup on the counter with a loud crack. “Why didn’t you do your business when you were outside an hour ago?”

Brock stared up at the door and swished his tail over the tile. He woofed softly.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Usher mumbled. He donned his coat, boots, and other heavy garments and then took the Colt .45 down from the top of the refrigerator. Making sure the safety was on, he sighed, placing the gun in his front waistband. He also grabbed a small flashlight and flicked it on. “Let’s go Mr. Poops A Lot.”

Usher opened the door, and Brock bounded out with an excited yip.

THE man was injured, so if the evil one returned, the man wouldn’t be able to move very fast. A foot wound would make it difficult for him to escape, should he need to. And with more bad weather—he aimed his muzzle into the freezing wind and sniffed—sweeping across the mountain tonight, the evil one would use it to mask his whereabouts. The snow would be heavier, and it would arrive soon too.

He rose and trotted through the crusty snow along the edge of the woods. At the far corner of the back lawn, he sat on his haunches and watched the lights glowing warmly through the home’s windows. A shadow passed by one. The man seemed restless.

Something tickled his senses, something dark and sinister. He sampled the air again.

Evil was in the woods.

At that moment, a shadow appeared at the back door. The door opened, and the dog scampered out, followed by the man. What were they doing outside again? They should've been in the house for the night, where it was safe.

Rising, he moved through the woods to observe from a safer distance.

## Chapter Nine

WITH total darkness blanketing the world, Usher aimed the flashlight beam out across the back lawn. Carefully, he stepped off the porch and half walked, half lurched into the area where the snow had been mashed down from daily traffic around the house. Farther into the undisturbed yard, the dog leapt from one spot in the smooth snow to another. He paused at his usual pee spot, by an old stump where Angie had always planted petunias.

Usher turned his back to the biting wind. Snowflakes danced in the flashlight's beam. *Great, the snow has already started.* Trees creaked as they swayed in the gale. Usher tried to glance around, but the snow stung his eyes, and the wind's icy breath greedily stole his away.

"Hurry up, boy. It's fucking cold out here!"

Brock glanced over at him but lowered his head to the snow once more and sniffed through it to the mashed edge of the high-traffic area. There, he found an odor that held him in its grip, and followed it to a set of tracks leading across the lawn and over to the edge of the woods.

"Oh, no you don't." Sensing the dog was going into one of his rare, obstinate moods, Usher added, "Get your furry ass back over here, Brock. It's time to go inside. It's too damn cold and dark for you to go chasing after a rabbit or raccoon."

Before he could utter another word, Brock tore off as if someone had zapped him with a cattle prod. He barked as he raced into the woods.

“Brock!” A sinking sensation assailed Usher. “Brock, get your ass back here! Brock!”

The Irish Setter barked from deeper in the forest, the sound echoing through the cold, naked trees.

The wind kicked up, blowing snow and bits of sleet into his face. Usher gasped and turned his face away from it again.

“Damn!” He waited, listening.

The dog continued barking, farther away this time.

“Brock!” Usher issued a piercing whistle. “Get back here, boy!”

He listened. The dog’s sounds seemed to come from the same spot. *At least it seems that he’s stopped. He must’ve found whatever he was chasing.*

Uneasy about leaving his pet outdoors, Usher made the decision to go back into the house. He stopped to gather an armload of wood and limped into the kitchen with it, kicking the door shut with his good foot.

“Damn you, Brock. Something strange is out there in those woods, and the weather is fucking horrible, but no! You decide tonight’s the perfect night to chase after a stupid rabbit.” He stacked the wood in the box by the fireplace and then returned to the kitchen. He opened the door and yelled outside a few times for his pet. When the dog didn’t return, he slammed the door shut and placed the Colt on the table.

*I’ll give him half an hour and then try calling for him again.*

Usher took off his gear and settled in the living room to watch the last thirty minutes of the evening news.

WITH worry lodged in his gut, Usher dressed and stepped into his boots yet again. He slipped the pistol into his waistband and walked outside. The wind howled twice as fiercely as it had half an hour ago. Snow fell diagonally as the gale drove it into snowdrifts and against the sides of trees, buildings, and any other stationary objects where the precipitation piled up easily.

“Brock! Where are you, boy?”

Silence.

“Brock!” Usher let out another high-pitched whistle, but the wind ripped it away. “Shit. Now what do I do?”

He couldn’t bear the thought of leaving Brock out for the night. The worry of something dangerous in the woods was one thing, but the idea of finding his dog dead after spring thaw bothered him too.

With a worried sigh, Usher unsnapped the woolen flaps to his hat and tugged them down over his ears. He zipped his coat up to his chin, took out his Colt, and aimed the flashlight at the spot in the trees where his dog had vanished. Slowly, he hobbled across the snow to the tree line.

He called several times for his pet, the dog’s name slipping through the trees like arrows of ice. However, he didn’t hear a bark or any other sound except for the squeaks of the swaying treetops and the wind that blasted through them. Heavy snowfall made it difficult to see more than a few feet into the woods.

The thought of the wolf he’d seen earlier that evening came to mind, but surely the animal had taken cover from the weather by now? Still, what if the wolf was out there watching him?

“I swear, if I see that wolf I’ll shit a truckload of gold bricks,” he whispered, as his breath froze in the air only to be snatched away.

Gripping the gun handle tightly in his right hand, Usher took a few more halting steps into the woods. He squinted through the snow, looking for any sign of his dog or the dog’s passage. Behind him, the wind had already begun to whisk away his footprints.

He yelled for Brock again, but more silence answered him.

*I hope he’s okay. I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to Brock.* Worry kicked his heart into a higher gear. *Come on, buddy. Show yourself so we can get back to the house.*

Uncertain whether to proceed deeper into the woods or go back to the house, Usher peered through the twinkling snowflakes. With an injured foot making it difficult to walk, and the snow so deep in the woods, he felt like an idiot even entertaining the thought of going farther, but he couldn’t just leave Brock, either.

A flurry of noise erupted from a few yards away. Brock’s barks now sounded furious and protective. Startled, Usher lost his balance and toppled over backward, landing on his ass in several inches of snow. The wind sucked his breath away, and a spray of snow forced a gasp from him.

Brock’s barks turned into snarls and growls brimming with menace.

“Brock?” Unease slithered over Usher’s body and stood the hair up on his nape. He struggled to his side and pushed himself up on his knees, got his good foot under him and pushed himself into a standing position. “Come on, boy. Let’s get out of here.”

The dog snarled louder, but Usher couldn't see him in the driving snow, the flashlight's bright beam unable to penetrate the heavy precipitation. *Something's wrong.* He squinted against the sharp flakes hitting his eyes and exposed face, their sparkles brilliant in the illumination. *I don't want to leave Brock, but I have this feeling—*

Something massive and black leapt out of the blinding snow. Usher caught a glimpse of snapping teeth and fiery eyes before it slammed into his shoulder, knocking him off his feet again. Flat on his back, the impact stunned him. He lay blinking up into the darkness, adrenaline screaming through his nervous system, pulse thunderous in his ears.

*Wolf!* Fear sluiced through Usher. *The wolf just leapt at me!*

But wolves didn't attack without a reason, did they? Shaking, Usher searched his mind for an answer.

*They do if game is scarce! Shit!*

Barking split the night, and Brock sailed over his body. The dog landed a few feet away, where he continued barking and snarling.

Confused and unable to see anything, Usher sat up and glanced around. He was able to make out the darker outline of Brock nearby, but the flashlight had landed between his feet, and its beam shot across the ground in the opposite direction, the small hillocks and snow-covered stumps glistening like billions of tiny diamonds.

He grasped the light and panned it around. Suddenly illuminated, Brock glanced at Usher, but he quickly returned his attention to something just out of the light's reach. The dog's hackles stood rigidly; the hair down Brock's spine puffed out right down to the end of his tail. With his lips peeled back

and fangs and teeth exposed, the dog looked like a sleeker, redder Cujo. Snarls emanated from Usher's pet that Usher had never heard before.

"What's out there, boy?" Usher whispered. Slowly, he managed to stand. As he swept the flashlight beam back and forth across the area the massive creature had hidden in, he sensed something watching him, gauging his every move.

Brock's snarling grew worse. The dog's entire body shivered with the sound. He began backing toward Usher one step at a time. Soon, the growls transformed into a frightening combination of growls, snarls, barks and snapping.

"Aw, hell. Come on, pal. Let's back out of the woods together nice and easy."

Afraid of falling over something, Usher glanced behind him and froze. There, only ten or twelve feet away, stood a wolf, its yellow-white eyes catching the illumination from the flashlight.

*Fuck! Don't let it be with a pack of wolves!*

Stunned, Usher looked over at Brock and spotted something in the gloom, its body blacker than the night and moving steadily toward them. He blinked and more fear sliced his gut to ribbons. Whatever was closing in on him and Brock was huge.

Remembering the Colt .45, Usher flicked the safety off and pointed it in the direction of the dark form. Scared as hell, he tried to keep his hand from shaking, the pistol's barrel shimmying in small circles. If Usher had to fire the gun, maybe the sound of it would scare the creature away.

A burst of wind kicked snow up to spin around with the falling flakes. Momentarily blinded, Usher wondered which direction to turn. Brock let out a burst of crazy barking. The sound startled Usher, and he nearly squeezed the trigger. The

wind died, his vision cleared, and he found himself staring at something straight out of a horror movie.

*Heaven have mercy!* Usher uttered a strangled cry and nearly fell to his knees. *A werewolf!*

The creature stood upright like a man, but it towered over Usher. Covered in pitch-black fur, the thing regarded him with large amber eyes. Its ears stood tall, with tufts of hair on their tips. It snarled, the sound something Usher fancied would emerge from the depths of Hell, and it ran its long, blood-red tongue over and around its snout, its canines winking wetly in the light beam.

Usher couldn't move, couldn't think. The more he tried to get his feet to work, the harder fear stabbed him. His heart beat so hard that pain filled his chest and ringing began in his ears.

Brock backed up and pressed against Usher's legs.

The werewolf lunged at them, and Usher staggered backward, pain flaring in his injured foot. He caught his boot heel on something hard and stationary, losing his balance. He clenched the pistol tightly, inadvertently squeezing off a shot that whizzed off into the forest, the sound muffled by the storm. Usher windmilled his arms but kept falling. As a smaller blur of dark fur swept past him, he landed in the snow on his side. Rolling onto his back and sitting up, Usher gaped at the wolf behind him. With its teeth bared and its hackles raised, it leapt between him and the werewolf.

*What the hell's going on?* Usher staggered to his feet.

"Brock!" he yelled.

With the flashlight beam wobbling wildly across the snow in front of him, he lunged, hobbled, and lurched back to the house. Brock stayed in front of him as sounds of a dogfight

from hell filled the winter air. The cold froze Usher's throat and poked icy fingers into his lungs, but the terror coursing through his body fueled him onward.

Usher stumbled over a fallen limb covered in snow and fell to his knees. His hat flew off his head and landed somewhere under the brush. He dismissed it, wanting only to reach the safety of the house.

*A werewolf! How is that possible?*

He hurried through a cluster of blackberry bushes, their thorns ripping and pulling at his jeans and parka as Brock, panting heavily, waited for him on the other side. Everything that had happened around his farm, including the death of the filly, suddenly made sense.

*Why did the timber wolf protect me?* Usher burst from the tree line, his foot singing with pain, and nearly sprawled face first in his backyard. He limped to the porch and threw open the kitchen door. Brock scrambled in behind him, and Usher slammed the door, locking it. His legs gave out, and he slid down the doorframe until his butt touched the floor. Usher stared at the tears in his clothes, the snow and ice already starting to melt from his boots and jeans.

Remembering the Colt clutched in his hand, he slid the safety on again and placed the weapon on the floor as he waited for his heart rate to slow, his terror to fade, and the trembling of his body to subside. Nausea gripped his stomach, and for a moment he thought he might lose his TV dinner.

Whining, Brock lay down next to him and placed his muzzle on his paws. The dog sighed as if to say, "Thank God we made it."

With his pulse still crashing through his body, Usher offered a silent prayer of thanks for their escape.

## Chapter Ten

FOR the fourth time, Usher navigated the house, double-checking the windows and the doors. The image of the werewolf was emblazoned in his mind. Every time he closed his eyes he saw it lunging for him. Even two shots of whiskey from the old bottle he kept in a junk drawer did nothing to calm him.

An hour later, Brock finally seemed at ease and stretched out in front of the fireplace. Usher flipped the television on again and placed a short glass of whiskey and Coca-Cola on the end table by his recliner. He glanced down at his pet, who dozed with an occasional snort and snore.

*Damn, pal. I wish I could shake that encounter off as easily as you have.*

His nerves still tingling, Usher sat in the recliner. He picked up his glass and grimaced at how badly his hand still trembled. He knocked back a big gulp of his drink, hoping it would begin to dull his senses so he could relax. As he set the tumbler on the table again, he picked up the remote with his other hand and hit the button for the satellite's program guide.

An abrupt series of knocks on the front door frightened him so badly he jerked and dropped the remote on the floor.

"Fuck!"

Ramrod stiff, Usher remained in the recliner, listening. Across the room, Brock sat up, ears perked.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Usher! It's Jarreth!"

Relief, elation, and worry all coursed through Usher at the same time. *What's Jarreth doing here? He would've called if he just wanted to hang out.* Thinking of the werewolf out there somewhere, he lurched up out of the chair and stumbled-walked to the front door.

"Jarreth?" Usher called.

"Yeah, and it's colder than a witch's tit out here, man!"

Usher couldn't help but laugh as he opened the door. Brock woofed happily and danced around Usher's feet.

"Get in here before you freeze your balls off," Usher ordered.

"Hey, how are you and Brock faring in this crazy weather?" Jarreth said as he peeled off his coat and other outdoor garments. He smiled warmly.

The aroma of fresh snow and spicy cologne wafted over Usher and prompted his pulse to race. *Damn, he smells wonderful!* Usher shut and locked the door. Pausing, he forced the desire rising in him to abate and instead decided on whether or not to tell Jarreth what had happened an hour ago. *He seemed really upset with me this afternoon, so if I tell him there's a werewolf prowling Stone Trail, he'll probably think I'm nuts and run like hell.* He turned, and without looking at him, motioned Jarreth into the living room. Brock padded in front of him and resumed his position in front of the hearth.

"It's been a cold, snowy evening," he said as nonchalantly as he could. "I even fed the horses early tonight. It's too nasty to be out in the elements."

"Tell me about it," said Jarreth. He flopped down on the sofa and looked at Usher. "I had to drive Mom to Statesbury Hospital late this afternoon. It's snowing so hard now that I was afraid to navigate those sharp turns the last few miles into

Stone Trail.” His gaze swept over Usher, poised on the edge of the recliner’s seat. Concern washed over his features, and he tipped his head to one side as if sizing Usher up. “Uhm... I was going to ask if you’d mind if I bunk here tonight, but you seem like you’re not yourself. Is everything all right?”

“I’m fine.” Usher slid back in the chair and began to actually relax. “You just scared the hell out of me when you banged on the door. I wasn’t expecting anyone, especially with the weather like it is.” He reached for his drink.

Instantly, Jarreth focused on his glass. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” He cupped the tumbler between his hands. “Is your mother sick?”

A big sigh escaped Jarreth. He sat back in the corner of the sofa and threw one arm along the back of it. “She had an episode today that was so bad I was at my wit’s end. I knew a big snow was coming in, and I didn’t want to be snowed in if Mom got worse, so I decided to take her to the hospital. At least there they can give her sedatives to calm her down. She kept screaming about blood and fangs.”

Shocked and concerned, Usher gaped at his friend. “Good grief!”

Jarreth nodded. “I was really freaked out by it.”

“Man, I’m so sorry.”

His friend shrugged. “I hate to admit it, but she’s getting worse. It’s horrible to see your parent fade away like that, and you can’t do a damn thing about it but watch it happen.”

They sat quietly for several minutes. The fire crackled and popped. The wind hit the windows, and the glass panes vibrated.

Finally, Usher said, “You’re more than welcome to stay here any time you like, Jarreth. It’s not like I have a house full of people.” He laughed, but the sound came out forced and tinny.

“You’re sure?” Jarreth quirked an eyebrow.

“Positive.”

“Thanks, Usher.”

“Are you hungry? Want a drink?” He held up the tumbler.

“I had something to eat at the hospital, but I could use a drink, if you don’t mind.”

“Done,” said Usher. He rose and hobbled into the hallway.

“How’s the foot?” Jarreth asked loudly.

“It hurts like a son of a bitch, but at least it’s not nearly as bad as it was last night,” he called.

Usher pulled the half-full bottle of Heaven Hill from the drawer and placed it on the counter. He removed a couple of ice cubes from the freezer and dropped them in the glass. The sound of them jingling in the tumbler seemed to comfort him more than anything else. *Jarreth doesn’t act like he’s upset anymore. Did I imagine the change in him this afternoon?* Using a shot glass, Usher measured out a portion and dumped it over the ice.

Outside, the wind howled around the back corner of the house and rattled the kitchen window. He startled slightly, his heart rate increasing, but once he realized it was only the wind, his nerves settled again.

“Want a double?” he hollered.

“Hell, yeah!”

A chuckle burst from Usher, followed by intense relief. Despite the monster that lurked somewhere outside, it

appeared everything else was back to normal. He picked up the whiskey bottle to pour another shot.

“By the way,” Jarreth said behind him, surprising Usher, “I found your hat out on the path in the front yard. I just hung it in the hall.”

The announcement speared Usher with shock. His hand trembled, and he dribbled alcohol on the countertop. “You found my—”

“Your hat, yeah.” Jarreth leaned against the counter, his serene eyes meeting Usher’s. “Something wrong?”

“N-no. I lost my hat today, but I guess the wind must’ve blown it across the yard.”

He finished making Jarreth’s drink, handed it to him, and limped back to the living room. Jarreth followed and set the tumbler on the coffee table. He knelt in front of the fireplace. In seconds, he had the flames stoked and added more wood to the fire.

“Don’t you have a backup heating system?” Jarreth asked. He stood and brushed the chaff from his hands over the wood box.

Usher handed him his glass, his mind still wrestling with Jarreth’s announcement about his hat. *I lost it in the woods. It landed somewhere in the brush, so how did it end up in the front yard?* A startling thought slapped his brain. *Did the werewolf bring it back as its way of toying with me, making me wonder where and when I’ll run into it again?*

He remembered Jarreth’s question and answered, “Yes, but this house is small enough that as long as the temperature doesn’t drop into the single digits, the fireplace and a couple of electric heaters keep the house comfortable.”

Jarreth nodded, returned to his favored spot on the couch and sipped from his drink. He let out a long sigh. "That hits the spot."

Usher's gaze met his. At the dark dreaminess of Jarreth's eyes, a pang of longing flowed through Usher. *Dammit, every time I look at the guy I want to either snuggle in his arms or jump his bones.*

He looked away and picked up the remote. "There doesn't seem to be much of a choice in programming tonight. Lots of re-runs and reality shows." He glanced at Jarreth. "Which I hate."

"Me, too... well, except for *Survivor*." Jarreth grinned as if his honest answer had embarrassed him. "Since it's a game, too, I always liked that one, but it's the only one. After *Survivor*, everyone else decided to jump on the reality bandwagon, and it got old in a hurry. Life is tough enough without having to watch everyone else's lives played out on TV too."

Usher surfed through channels, the tension in the air palpable. He paused on a Stephen King movie called *Silver Bullet*, only to discover it was about a werewolf. *Oh, hell no!* He hit the remote button for the next channel.

"I'm sorry about today," Jarreth said.

Nearly dropping the remote again, Usher looked over sharply. "What?"

"I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable this afternoon. I just wanted to apologize."

"Oh... yeah." He gulped as he tried to process the oddness of Jarreth's apology. "I thought maybe I'd upset you."

"No, not at all. I realized I might be giving you the wrong signals, and felt really bad about it," said Jarreth. He avoided

eye contact and focused on the fire. “So, I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong idea.”

Usher studied him for a moment, but his friend still wouldn’t meet his gaze. *Well, that’s it. He’s not gay.* He drew in a breath, held it and let it out quietly. *It figures. I fall for someone for the first time in eight years and the dude’s not gay.* Disappointment nearly suffocated Usher. He grabbed his drink and downed it. *I might as well finish taking the edge off this lousy night.* He stood and ambled to the kitchen for another whiskey and Coke, the feeling of letdown so intense he couldn’t deal with it.

Footsteps alerted him that Jarreth had followed him to the kitchen.

“You seem pissed, or troubled—or both,” Jarreth said from the doorway.

Usher shrugged. “No, I’m not pissed—troubled, yes, but I’m not mad.”

“Troubled about what?”

Although he couldn’t bring himself to tell Jarreth about the werewolf, he went ahead and relayed the day’s events involving Doc Evirgrew, Sheriff Kingston and Ramsey.

“They may have a point,” said Jarreth. “Bored teenagers do some crazy things, and can get themselves into a ton of trouble as a result.”

“This matter isn’t caused by a bunch of kids.” Usher put another ice cube in his glass and splashed whiskey into it without measuring.

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I ran into the thing that killed the filly and wrecked the freezer.” Frustrated, Usher skipped adding the

soda and slugged back the whiskey. “And from what I saw, this thing has a definite problem with me.”

Jarreth reached across the counter and grabbed the bottle. He clutched it against his chest. “You *are* upset. What the hell happened here tonight, Usher?”

He turned and met Jarreth’s eyes. In them he saw sincerity and concern. Worse, he saw love, but not the kind he wanted. The kindness in Jarreth’s gaze nearly sent him over the edge. Tears threatened, something he always felt was a weakness, and he swallowed hard as the alcohol finally drifted through his senses on clouds of dullness.

“Usher?” His friend nudged his shoulder in a brotherly manner. “What’s going on? What did you see?”

He looked at Usher, wishing he could lead him into the bedroom and just cuddle. It would be so nice to have someone take care of him, hold him, tell him everything was okay and the world couldn’t hurt him or ridicule him anymore.

“Well,” said Usher, “it was a werewolf.”

Jarreth blinked. “What?”

“See, that’s why I didn’t want to tell you. I knew you wouldn’t believe me. Hell, no one would believe me, so I don’t blame you.” He finished his drink and pushed the glass over to the sink’s edge. “And the authorities sure as hell aren’t going to take my story seriously. They’ll just label me as ‘that crazy queer who owns the horse farm’.”

“Stop that!” Anger flashed in Jarreth’s eyes.

“Stop what?”

“Stop talking like that. It pisses me off. You’re letting yourself be defeated without a fight.”

“Do you believe that I saw a werewolf tonight?” Usher countered. Anxiety pulsed in the center of his chest. “That

thing nearly killed me tonight, and if it hadn't been for a timber wolf jumping between us so I could get away, I'd probably be dead right now."

"I don't know what to believe."

"See what I mean?"

"Dammit, Usher, this is something that's out of a... out of a movie!"

"How the hell do you think I feel?" Usher's anxiety transformed into frustration. He slammed his hand down on the countertop, then whirled and snatched up the Colt from where he'd placed it on the top of the refrigerator. "How the hell do I protect myself?" He waved the pistol. "Let alone the horses, from a fucking werewolf? Do I make silver bullets?"

"Calm down." Jarreth grabbed his arm, turning Usher to face him. "Before you do something stupid." He took the .45 from Usher's hand, made sure the safety was on, and returned it to the top of the fridge.

Momentarily defeated, Usher leaned against the refrigerator as Jarreth stretched to put the gun back. The man's aroma slipped over Usher, tantalizing his senses, taunting his prick. For an instant Jarreth's broad shoulders blocked his view of the kitchen. *Damn, he's built just the way I like, too. A long, tall, drink of water with amazing shoulders.* Usher gulped. *I don't know how I can just be friends with him....*

Assured the pistol was safely put away, Jarreth leaned back and looked down into Usher's eyes. "Now, let's keep the Colt in its spot until it's truly needed, okay?"

"Yeah." The desire pounding through Usher rendered him incapable of further words.

An odd light danced in Jarreth's dark eyes. "Let's talk about this—"

It happened before Usher could stop himself. He leaned closer to Jarreth. The man's cologne and personal scent infiltrated his senses. The aromas crashed through his defenses like a marauder storming a fortress. Unable to control himself, he brushed Jarreth's lips with his, and before Jarreth could protest, Usher tugged his head down and kissed him again, this time harder. He rested his hands on the man's waist and gently pulled him closer.

*Oh, my....* The remainder of Usher's thought evaporated on the desire that flamed through his body. Although Jarreth didn't respond, he didn't push Usher away either. Taking the opportunity, Usher deepened the kiss. Jarreth's beard stubble rasped against Usher's chin like fine sandpaper as Usher tickled the seam of Jarreth's lips with his tongue. The need that surged into Usher's cock took his breath away, and a sound of pure desire escaped him. He slid his hands up Jarreth's sides, swept them over his pecs and up to the man's shoulders.

Jarreth stood rigidly, but Usher wasn't defeated. He threaded one hand in Jarreth's silky hair, reveling in the sensation of it against his rough palms. Oh, how he wanted to show Jarreth how much he cared for him, send him to rapturous heights and then start all over again!

Usher pulled his head in closer, his mouth devouring Jarreth's. The man sucked in a deep breath, his body trembling from head to toe. Taking the shivers as a good sign, Usher broke the barrier of Jarreth's lips and delved inside with his tongue, tasting mint and the remnants of whiskey.

Another tremble passed through Jarreth, and he placed his hands against Usher's chest. For a moment, Usher thought the tables had turned, but Jarreth pushed away from him, breaking the kiss.

“Don’t!” Jarreth said breathily. “This isn’t right.”

The feeling of loss that hit Usher nearly sent him to his knees.

“I... I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He wrenched away from Jarreth. “I couldn’t help myself, and when you didn’t pull away, I thought... well—”

“You startled me, that’s all.” Jarreth returned to the counter and opened the bottle of booze. He poured some into Usher’s discarded glass and swallowed it. “Kissing me was the last thing I expected.”

Heat singed Usher’s cheeks and warmed his neck. *Son of bitch! I can’t believe I just kissed him like that and freaked him out so badly! What the hell’s the matter with me?* He started to say something, but his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Jarreth gripped the Heaven Hill bottle as if he was thinking of taking another slug from it. His body shook from top to bottom.

Finally, Usher pried his tongue loose and said, “Man, I am so sorry. I... I shouldn’t have done that, and if you hate me, I totally understand.”

Jarreth stood silently. A long moment passed, and the man sighed heavily. With his back still to him, he replied, “I don’t hate you, Usher. I just didn’t expect you to do that. It’s a little hard to wrap my mind around.”

Mortified, Usher scrubbed one hand over his stubbly jaw line as he desperately sought a method to rectify the situation. “I hope you don’t leave because of me. You really shouldn’t go out on the roads in this weather. I promise I won’t try something like that again.” His throat tightened with emotion and his last words came out in a whisper. “You can sleep in the guest room and lock the door.”

Laughter tumbled from Jarreth, surprising Usher. He gaped at the man's back. *What the hell's so funny?*

"I'm not going to lock the door, and I'll still sleep on the sofa." Putting the cap back on the whiskey, Jarreth sighed and then shoved the bottle away. "Look, I really like you, Usher. I'm an outsider, a city slicker in the eyes of those who live around here, so I don't have a lot of friends. I value your friendship and don't want to mess that up. If you're okay just brushing this under the rug and remaining friends, then I am too."

Intense relief fell over Usher. "Are you serious?"

Smiling, Jarreth nodded.

"You're an amazing person, you know that?"

"I sure do," said Jarreth, and then he burst out laughing.

Usher started laughing too. He turned, opening the fridge and withdrew the two liter bottle of Coke and a tub of chip dip. "Grab the chips out of that cupboard." He pointed to one behind Jarreth. "And let's find something to watch while it snows."

"Sounds like a plan."

Limping into the living room, Usher wished more than ever that Jarreth could be his partner. He had fallen head over heels in love with the man, but now he had to put those feelings away in his heart and keep them under lock and key.

## Chapter Eleven

A LITTLE before eight o'clock, Usher's cell phone rang. He limped into the kitchen where he'd left it on the table and flipped it open.

"Hello?"

"Usher," a woman's teary voice burst from the phone, "can you come and get me?"

"Hanna?" An icy spear of unease stabbed Usher through the gut. "What's wrong? Where's Denver?"

Tears of desperation filled Hanna's voice. "He's...."

Fear replaced Usher's unease, and the hairs on his nape stood up. "Hanna? Where is Denver? Put him on the phone."

"Denver is—" A sob floated over the airwaves. "Denver is dead."

"What?" Usher's knees gave out, and he collapsed into a chair.

"We were in the barn making sure the heaters were on and that the cows were all right," she whispered. "This... this thing burst into the barn and slaughtered half a dozen cows. I swear it's a werewolf, Usher! When Denver came out of the office with a shotgun, the creature grabbed his arm and ripped it from his body."

"How did you get away?"

"I dropped through the trapdoor in the back of the barn. I'm hiding in the grain bin. I remembered I had my cell phone and called you."

"Call the police!"

"I did, but the dispatcher said the sheriff and all the deputies are out on accident calls."

With his legs quivering, Usher rose and flipped on the back porch light. Snow fell so heavily he couldn't see beyond the edge of the top step.

"I'm on my way, Hanna."

"Usher, I don't know where that thing went," she said, lowering her voice. "The cows are bawling upstairs, so I can't hear anything. Be careful, and bring weapons."

"Call me should you need to," he replied, his heart thundering painfully. "The snow is accumulating fast, so it might take time for me to reach you."

"Okay." She hung up.

"What's wrong?" Jarreth asked from the doorway.

"Remember how you reacted to my tale about the werewolf?"

Jarreth regarded him skeptically, his eyes wide and appraising.

"Well, it attacked Hanna's cattle in the milking parlor and killed her farmhand."

"Mother of mercy!" Jarreth said.

Usher pulled a set of keys from his pants pocket and tossed them to his friend. "Get the two shotguns out of the gun safe in my bedroom. There's a .12 gauge and a .16 gauge. Make sure you get plenty of ammo, including a dozen or so bullets for my .45 too."

“I’m going with you,” said Jarreth.

“No, your mother needs you, so just stay here.” Slipping his feet into his boots, Usher paused and looked at Jarreth. “I mean it. Stay here.”

“Fuck that. I’m going with you, and from what you’ve just told me, we don’t have time to debate it.” Jarreth turned and disappeared down the hall.

“Shit!” With his hands shaking, Usher laced his boots and tied them securely.

Fear smothered him. His encounter with the werewolf earlier that evening had left him scared shitless to face it again, but he couldn’t leave Hanna over there alone. She was one of the true friends he had in Stone Trail, and the best neighbor anyone could ever want too. With Bill gone, and now Denver, he could only imagine how terrified she was right now.

Jarreth returned to the kitchen. “The guns are by the front door and I have the ammo in my coat pockets.”

After he shrugged into his coat, Usher nodded and put his cell in his inner pocket. “Let’s go.”

Brock appeared next to Jarreth and wagged his tail. He whined and then woofed softly as if to say “I want to help too.”

“Oh, no you don’t. You’re staying here, pal,” said Usher. “You’ve already had all the *fun* you’re going to have for one night.”

JARRETH drove his Dodge along the snow-covered highway. Usher wanted to take the road cutting through the woods, but he knew the snow would be too deep. He sat in the passenger

seat, worrying that the werewolf was still in Hanna's barn and that it would find her.

Usher looked askance at his friend. *If something happens to Jarreth, I won't be able to live with myself.*

The Dodge's headlights did little to slice through the heavy snow. Between the darkness, the snowfall, and the wind blowing it in all directions, Usher wondered how Jarreth could see anything. Lights approached from the oncoming traffic lane.

"Hell," said Jarreth. "That looks like a plow truck. I'm afraid to get over too far and end up in the ditch." He pulled the Dodge over and stopped.

The snowplow plodded through, its engine rumbling loudly in the snow-filled air. The truck's tires jingled merrily with chains as it passed. After the snowplow drove by, Jarreth edged the Dodge through the snow and into the cleared lane.

"Well, this is a little good luck. Maybe we'll have more good luck at Hanna's place too," he said.

"I hope you're right," Usher replied. He realized he was clenching his hands, and uncurled them, his knuckles protesting. "Hanna is a good friend. I'll freak if something has happened to her."

"Think positive."

"I'm trying." Usher sighed worriedly. "It always seems like I lose people I care about." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jarreth glance over at him.

"How so?"

"My parents died when I was in my early twenties, my sister moved away with her husband, and my... uh... my—"

“Your life partner?” Jarreth supplied. He shifted the Dodge into third gear and cruised carefully along the plowed strip of road.

“Yes, Zander too.”

“I think that’s the first time you’ve even mentioned his name.”

“It hurts too much to think about him, let alone talk about him.”

Jarreth whistled low with sympathy. “Man, breakups are always hard and they’re often ugly too.”

“Zander didn’t leave me for someone else,” Usher told him. He stared through the windshield at the blanket of snow falling relentlessly. “We were at a Western bar one night. There was a mechanical bull-riding contest with a purse of two grand, so the competition was fierce.” Emotion clenched his throat and tears pricked the back of his eyes. “One jerk was really drunk and rowdy that night, and he was pissed that a ‘gay cowboy’ was giving him a run for his money.”

“This story doesn’t have a happy ending, does it?” Jarreth asked softly.

Usher pointed at the turn-off for Hanna’s farm. “When it came down to the last round, Zander and this guy were the last two riders. The judges had Zander ride first. His opponent flipped the mechanical bull on professional mode, and since Zander wasn’t expecting the sudden change in its movements, he was thrown off. Despite the padded floor, he landed in an awkward manner and it snapped his neck, killing him instantly.”

“Holy hell,” Jarreth exclaimed. “What happened? Don’t tell me that jerk got away with it.”

Shaking his head, Usher replied, “No, he was prosecuted and is serving time, but his family said they’d get even with me for putting him in jail.”

“Did they?” Jarreth slowed the Dodge and fought it through a snow drift lining the edge of the lane. “Get even, I mean.”

“No, but they live in Waylon, which is three hours away. If I lived in the same town, I figure I’d have trouble from them.”

Jarreth slowed at the Tope Farm’s gate. “I’m so sorry, Usher.”

“It’s all water under the bridge now. Zander’s gone and I’m alone.” He heard Jarreth’s sharp intake of breath over the blasting heater. He looked at him quickly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that to come out like that.”

“I knew what you meant, so don’t worry about it. Really.” Parking about fifty yards away from the barn, Jarreth added, “With the wind howling like it is, I think we should park here and walk. I’d hate for the werewolf—” He shivered. “To hear us coming.”

“I know you think this is crazy, but this thing is real.” Usher grasped one of the shotguns and held his other hand out. “Give me the shells for the .16 gauge.”

Jarreth passed him the shells and then shut off the truck’s lights and engine. “Let’s go.”

When Usher opened the door and stepped into the wind, the sharpness of it ripped his breath away. He hated to do it, but he removed his thick gloves so he could pull the trigger if he needed to and stuffed them into one of his coat pockets. He motioned for Jarreth to follow him, and together they started down the side lane to the barn. Snow stung Usher’s face and eyes. He blinked against it, but the wind ravaged everything,

driving the flakes into every nook and cranny. The new snow reached above his ankles, and drifts lined the fence and along one bank.

Lights glowed in the barn's lower windows. Cows bawled and moored, their calls full of anxiety and fear. A gust of wind whipped around the lower corner of the building. It caught the top of a snowdrift and sprayed Usher with needle-like ice fragments. He turned away from the sparkling dust just as it caught Jarreth in the face, who gasped, cringing.

Usher reached for the door and slowly opened it. Warmth billowed out of the barn, followed by the odors of cow shit and antiseptic, mixed with something coppery and foreign that prompted Usher's stomach to lurch. He peeked inside, sliding his gaze from one side of the milking parlor to the other. The cows stood in their stanchions, their eyes wild and rolling, bodies trembling, feet stomping. One cow near the door saw him and moored loudly.

"See anything?" Jarreth whispered so softly Usher barely heard him.

He shook his head, keeping his gaze trained on the milking area. Fear pounded through his body. *I don't know if I'll react quick enough to even shoot the creature if it leaps out from somewhere. Hell, for all I know I might truly need silver bullets to kill it.*

Luckily, he'd helped Hanna from time to time, so he knew where the grain bins were located. With his legs trembling, he led the way down the concrete walkway between the stanchions and to the door that led into the office. There, on the far end, the bodies of six cows lay torn and ripped, their blood bathing the floor. Pieces of fur and meat lay scattered on the concrete and stuck to the wall. One cow's guts pooled on the floor in front of its belly, another cow rested on its side with its throat

ripped out. The odor of blood, feces, and milk gagged Usher. He glanced at Jarreth, who held his hand over his nose.

Usher pointed to the door. He rounded the low block wall at the end and stumbled over a pair of boots. He righted himself, turned and cried out at the sight before him.

On the floor, his torso turned to the right, and his hips and legs turned to the left, lay Denver, Hanna's hired hand. Missing an arm, the coat and shirt in tatters around the hole, the man gazed sightlessly at the rafters above them, his face contorted in an expression of pain and fear. Across the end walkway against the base of the wall lay Denver's arm. Blood pooled around the torn end of it.

"Werewolves are supposed to be people, right?" Usher whispered.

"That's what the stories say," replied Jarreth just as softly.

"Then not only are we dealing with a monster, but a murderer as well." A deep-rooted shiver passed through Usher as he remembered something. "And the other day, when we found the tracks of melting snow in the house—"

"The werewolf had entered and then left as its way to scare the hell out of you," Jarreth finished.

"Okay, that really freaks me out. Now I'll lock up my house during the day too." Usher grasped the doorknob and opened the door to enter a dimly lit hallway leading into a storage room where two bins held feed.

In the storage room, Usher crossed to the first bin and opened it to find corn and a big rat scurrying around. He quietly lowered the lid and moved to the second one, hefting the half lid up to peer inside it. The sweet aroma of its contents permeated his nose. Hanna squealed and cowered in the corner.

“Hey, it’s okay, Hanna. It’s just me,” Usher whispered. He glanced back at Jarreth, who stood with the door cracked open and kept watch through it with the .12 gauge clutched in both hands. “Come on. Let’s get you out of there.”

“Oh, Usher,” Hanna cried softly. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“What made you think of hiding in the grain bin?” he asked as he brushed grains, crushed corn and crystallized bits of molasses from Hanna’s clothes.

“I thought maybe the grain and molasses would help disguise my scent.” She hugged him tightly, her body trembling so hard Usher thought she might rattle apart.

“Good thinking,” he said. “Do you know if the werewolf has left?”

She shook her head. “I have no idea.”

“Everything’s clear,” said Jarreth. “Let’s get her out of here while we can.”

Usher made Hanna stay behind him as he walked quickly and quietly down the hall, trailing Jarreth. His friend paused at the door opening into the milking parlor, looked to the left and right, and then waved at them to follow.

Upon seeing Denver and the slain cows, Hanna gasped. “Oh Lord in heaven!”

“Don’t look at him or the cows,” Usher commanded. “Focus on the door across the milking parlor and just follow Jarreth.”

She nodded, her mouth a thin, gray line, her eyes wide and glassy with fear and revulsion.

They reached the far door, and Jarreth opened it to swirling snow and biting wind. The livestock bellowed and stomped behind them.

“What do I do about my milk cows?” Hanna asked.

“I don’t think the creature is interested in the cows anymore,” Usher soothed her. “It seems like it has gone.” He glanced around, his nerves singing high soprano. All he wanted to do was reach the truck and get the hell away from there.

Jarreth gazed back at them. “Come on. It’s too damn dark with too much snow flying around to tell whether or not it’s safe to step out there, so we’ll have to chance it.”

Clutching his shotgun in one hand, Usher took Hanna’s hand in his free one. “Stay close to me and keep your eyes on the Dodge parked up the side lane, all right?”

She nodded, her gaze full of trepidation.

“One, two,” Jarreth pushed the door wide, “three—now!”

They pushed out into the darkness. The wind tore at Usher’s coat and hat, shoving its icy fingers into his eyes, nose and ears. He squinted against the driving flakes, tugging Hanna steadily along behind him. The snow sucked at his boots, and they both slipped a couple of times, but they managed to climb the lane and reach the truck. He opened the door, helped Hanna into the back of the extended cab, and quietly shut the door before jumping in shotgun and shutting his door too.

Jarreth clambered into the driver’s seat and passed Usher his weapon. Once the engine started, he backed up the lane and turned the Dodge around.

“Where to, Hanna?” asked Usher. He turned in the seat to look at her. “If you don’t have a place to stay, you know you’re welcome at my place.”

“Or mine, for that matter,” Jarreth chimed in.

“Take me to The Cannonball,” she stated as tears trickled down her cheeks. “Jess will let me stay with her and the kids tonight.”

Usher reached over the seat, took Hanna’s hand and squeezed it to reassure her. “Everything will be all right.”

“I hope so,” she said.

Releasing her hand, Usher faced forward as Jarreth navigated the snowy drive. *What if I’m wrong? What if we can’t defeat this thing, and worse, what if it’s someone who lives amongst us here in Stone Trail?*

## Chapter Twelve

THE drive to Stone Trail was a slow and hazardous one. Usher began to wonder if they would ever reach town in one piece. Once Jarreth pulled into the parking lot of The Cannonball, Hanna seemed to relax. Usher hated seeing his friend so distraught, but he didn't blame her. His encounter with the werewolf had left him scarred. From now on he'd never be able to step outside at night without looking over his shoulder or peering into the tree line with fear. He could only imagine what Hanna had seen and the nightmares she'd have after this night.

With the snow and wind steadily filling in the plowed lanes and most of the citizens sequestered indoors, quiet reigned over the town except for a group of teenagers who crossed the parking lot on their way to the bowling alley. Only two cars were parked in The Cannonball's parking lot.

"Business is booming," said Usher.

Jarreth chuckled. "Yeah, I see that. Is Jess working tonight?"

Usher pointed. "That's her car over there."

Inside, the warmth of the building greeted them. Usher inhaled the familiar scents of pretzels, popcorn, draft beer and the faint odor of deep-fryer grease. The tavern's lights glowed dimly, bathing only one customer at the bar, who sat nursing a mug of beer.

"The motel is at the end of this street," Jess was saying, as Usher approached her with Jarreth and Hanna. She shoved a phone book across the counter to the patron. "It's called The Trail's Inn. You better look up the number and make sure they're not booked with travelers, due to this weather." As the man whipped out his cell and then started paging through the phone book, Jess turned her attention to Usher. "What on earth are you three doing out in weather like this?"

"What on earth are you doing at work on a night like this?" Usher shot back, smiling.

"My kids are with the sitter, and I can bunk in the back room if I have to," she replied, her eyes bright with humor. However, one look at Hanna sobered Jess. "Oh, hell. What's wrong?"

Hanna started to sob.

Jess flew around the bar and took her in her arms, hugging her tightly. She stared at Usher over the little woman's head. "What happened?"

"Not here." Jarreth nodded toward the barfly. "We'll sit out here and watch the bar while you take Hanna in the back and calm her down.

Jess nodded and escorted Hanna down the hall.

"What do we do for tonight?" Usher asked. He noted the time behind the bar: Ten o'clock. *I sure as hell don't want to travel the highway home.* Usher ambled behind the bar and reached for a bottle of whiskey. "Want a drink, Jarreth?"

"Not until I'm sure I don't have to drive anymore in this mess, but pick something out and I'll buy it. I figure we'll need some artificial calm to get through the rest of this night." Jarreth tugged his gloves off and shrugged out of his coat,

placing everything in an empty bar chair. "I think every nerve I have is frayed into fluff."

Usher laughed. "Me too."

"Good night, fellas," said the man sitting at the bar. "Tell the lady bartender that I'm leaving my car here." He jotted something down on a napkin with a pen from his front shirt pocket. "And that if there's a problem with me leaving it here, this is my cell number."

"Goodnight," Usher and Jarreth said simultaneously, and then grinned at one another.

"And be careful walking in this snow and wind," Usher added. "It's getting steadily worse out there."

The man put on his coat and hat, waved and left the building.

Jarreth took out his BlackBerry and dialed a number.

"Who are you calling?" asked Usher.

"The sheriff's office."

Usher listened as Jarreth relayed the night's events to the dispatcher, including the death of Hanna's farmhand and the cows that were slaughtered.

Shooting Usher a look of disbelief, Jarreth said into the cell, "So you're telling me there's no one who can come out to The Cannonball to talk to Hanna? How can you be the only one there? A man was killed by this... creature." He listened, nodded, and then said, "I believe she'll be staying with Jess, who tends bar here most of the time. Okay, thanks." Finally, he grumbled something under his breath and dropped his phone into his pants pocket.

"I take it there's no one on hand and there's nothing to do but sit and wait until the storm's over, right?"

Jarreth nodded.

“Fuck.”

“That’s an understatement,” Jarreth replied.

“Guys?”

Usher turned toward Jess who stood in the doorway. Jarreth looked at her expectantly.

“Hanna told me what happened,” she stated. “Denver’s dead?”

“It’s hard to comprehend,” Usher said, “but it’s true.”

She nodded once and walked over to the counter. “I’m having trouble accepting it, but by the way Hanna acted as she told me the story, I’m compelled to believe her.” Sighing, she leaned on the bar top with her forearms. “It’s frightening, though. Are you two sure it’s an actual werewolf and not a freak of nature, and the stormy night that made you think it was bigger and scarier than it really is?”

“Positive,” Usher replied. “And Hanna is right. Staying here in the bar is probably the best plan.”

“Right,” Jarreth stated. “Something like that is less apt to come into a big place where it can be seen.”

Jess glanced up at Usher and blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. “Yes, Hanna feels safe here since it’s a public place, and with business nonexistent tonight, it won’t be a problem to crash in the back. There are a couple of cots and plenty of blankets, so I’ll call my sitter and stay here with Hanna. That way the police won’t have far to travel when the storm stops. Maybe a deputy will come here first. I’ll just give the sheriff’s—”

“Already did that,” Jarreth said. “Only person in the office is the dispatcher.”

She groaned. “I figured as much.” Noticing the bottle of Jack Daniel’s on the bar top, she quirked a brow at Usher.

“Ring that up for us,” said Jarreth. “We’re going to my house once we leave here.”

Surprised, Usher said, “We are?”

His friend nodded. “Mom’s in the hospital, your dog is locked up safely in the house, and I’m not tempting fate by traveling that god-awful highway again in this storm.”

“You’re right.” Usher returned his attention to Jess as she slipped the whiskey into a fifth bag. “Are you sure you and Hanna will be okay?”

“Absolutely.” She handed Usher the bottle and then accepted a twenty from Jarreth. “I’ll lock up once you guys leave, and I have your cell number should I need to reach you.”

“Don’t step outside until daylight, understand?”

“I won’t, Usher. I’m not like one of those idiots in the horror movies.” She grinned.

Laughing, Jarreth put his coat on again and then stuffed the whiskey under one arm.

“Be safe,” Usher called as they left. “Oh, and the barfly’s cell number is on that napkin if you should need him to move his car tomorrow.”

He paused outside the entrance. Once Jess put the key into the lock and he heard it clack, he waved to her and walked in Jarreth’s snowy footprints to the Dodge.

THE trip through town raised the hair on Usher’s nape. Under any other circumstances, Stone Trail would’ve looked like a

magical Christmas world, but with a werewolf skulking around the mountain, the town had a sinister atmosphere.

Snow continued to fall in blinding white blankets. Jarreth turned on the wipers, but they did little to keep the flakes cleared, now that the precipitation had gone from fine and dry to large, wet flakes that clung to everything like puffy glue.

“Fuck,” said Jarreth, and he leaned forward, peering over the steering wheel. “Seems like the weather forecast was off again. By daybreak, we’ll have twice as much snow, if not more, than what the weather stations said.”

“Maybe the werewolf will freeze to death.” Usher watched as the businesses and residences sped past his window.

Jarreth laughed. “Something like that finds a warm place to hide out. I’m betting it was somewhere in the milking barn.”

“Why didn’t it attack us?”

“I’ve been tossing that around in my head.” Jarreth braked to make a right turn onto a narrow residential street. “And I’m convinced the werewolf was watching, gauging us, sizing us up. Plus, why attack us when we have shotguns?”

Usher looked over at his friend. “Are you saying that it still thinks like a human when it’s in werewolf form?”

He nodded.

“Wouldn’t we have to use silver bullets?”

“Well, if the legends are true, yes, but the werewolf would have no idea whether or not we had silver or not, so why take the chance of leaping out and getting killed?” Jarreth slowed the truck and turned into a narrow driveway.

Realization hit Usher hard. “Man, it’s difficult enough to deal with this thing as an animal that’s gone mad, but thinking about it with a human mind that thinks and plans its next move scares the shit out of me.”

Jarreth snorted. “No kidding.” He shut off the engine and then grabbed the whiskey and one of the shotguns. “Let’s go inside and make a late meal. After all the excitement, I’m starved.”

Getting out of the truck, Usher paused and looked up and down the neighborhood. *All these people inside their homes and they have no clue werewolves truly exist.* He shivered and shut the passenger door. Following Jarreth up a shoveled walk full of new snow, he stopped at the front stoop when his friend paused long enough to unlock the door and flip on the foyer light.

He shut and locked the door after Usher stepped inside and waited for him.

“Take your stuff off here and let it drip on those newspapers,” said Jarreth as Una’s Schnauzers danced and barked wildly around his feet. “We can lean the guns in the corner. I’ll put Mom’s dogs in the basement. Otherwise, they’ll be a nuisance since they’re not acquainted with you.”

Later, with the furnace blasting warmth into the house and the oven warming for a pizza Jarreth found in the freezer, Jarreth showed Usher around his mother’s home.

“Wow,” Usher said, “it looks small from the outside, but you have a lot of room.”

“That’s one of the things that sold my mom on buying this house.”

Usher admired the huge flat-screen TV, the curio cabinets full of feline and dog figurines, and three large shelving units—one for DVDS and two for books—built into two walls. He paused at a tall, elegant cabinet boasting beveled glass.

He pointed at something on a middle shelf. “That church building is beautiful.”

Jarreth smiled. “My father gave that statue to Mom on their tenth wedding anniversary. When I was a kid, our home burnt to the ground, so Mom lost all her keepsakes she had from their wedding. To appease her, Dad had a replica made of the chapel they were married in.” He chuckled softly. “My father loved surprises but had a tough time keeping something secret. He couldn’t stand anyone not knowing about what he was doing, so he told me about the gift and made me promise not to tell Mom. He even had silver accents put on the windows, the doors, and the entire steeple is silver too.”

“What a great gift,” said Usher. “Did your Mom like it?”

“She flipped over it, and it’s still her most prized possession.” Motioning, Jarreth turned and strode across the room. “Let’s sit in the kitchen. I need to put the pizza in the oven.”

Ten minutes later, they sat at the kitchen isle and sipped from short glasses of Jack Daniels with a splash of 7-Up. Usher admired the stainless steel and black enamel design of the kitchen as the aroma of a cinnamon air freshener overpowered the room.

Jarreth called the hospital to check on his mother. Seemingly satisfied, he disconnected the call and placed his BlackBerry on the countertop.

“How’s your mom?” Usher asked.

“Sleeping. She can come home tomorrow if the roads are cleared.”

“That’s good news.”

Usher let out a big sigh of relief. “Yes, it certainly is.”

“I feel like I’m in a nightmare and I can’t wake up.” Usher sipped from his glass. “I can’t help wondering about the big timber wolf too.”

“What about it?”

“Why did it save me?”

Frowning, Jarreth stood and began tearing the plastic off the frozen pizza. “What makes you think it saved you?”

“What other reason would it have to jump between me and the werewolf? It acted similar to how Brock was protecting me.”

The oven door opened with a creak, and Jarreth slid the pizza inside and shut the door again. He ripped up the cardboard bottom from the pizza packaging and tossed it in the trash can.

As Usher watched Jarreth move around the kitchen, suspicion poked his brain. *He saw the carnage at Hanna’s farm, so why does he act like he doesn’t believe me about the wolf?*

“The timber wolf might’ve had a score to settle with it,” said Jarreth. He checked the oven’s temperature. “Wolves, from what I understand, are very territorial.”

“Maybe, but you weren’t there, Jarreth. It really seemed like it was defending me.”

Jarreth took the pop out of the refrigerator and freshened both their drinks. “For now, let’s just relax and enjoy the quiet. My mother is safe, Hanna and Jess are fine and comfortable at the bar, and we’re here in the house safe and warm too.” He shuddered. “It’s been a weird evening.”

*Why do I get the feeling he’s avoiding the subject?* Usher frowned but just as quickly shrugged the thought away. Jarreth was right. Their emotions and nerves were high strung and it had been a bizarre evening, indeed.

“Shit,” said Jarreth. “I forgot to get the paper plates and chips out.”

As he started to get up again, Usher motioned for him to sit still. “Tell me where everything is. I’ll get it while you chill for a few.”

“That cabinet for the paper plates,” his friend replied, pointing, “and that one over there for the chips.”

Usher found the chips and set them on the isle, then opened the cabinet over the range. He searched its contents, his gaze sliding over plastic cups and utensils, an unopened box of salt, a pack of napkins, and several odds and ends such as birthday candles and cake decorating tools.

“No paper plates up here, Jarreth.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“I don’t see them.”

“I could’ve sworn we had a pack—”

Usher turned to say something and found himself toe to toe and face to face with Jarreth. His words died on the tip of his tongue, and his gaze locked with his friend’s. *Heaven help me, I could drown in those dark-chocolate eyes of his.* He swallowed, feeling heat creep up his neck and settle in his cheeks.

Jarreth’s eyes turned black, and his attention traveled over Usher’s face and settled on his mouth.

*Is he... is he thinking about kissing me? Could he actually—no, he’s not gay. He made that clear earlier tonight.*

Jarreth reached past him, his chest pressed to Usher’s shoulder. As he rummaged in the cupboard behind him, Usher could’ve sworn he heard Jarreth inhale deeply.

*What the hell? Did he just smell me?*

Regardless, the proximity of their bodies sent an electrical charge throughout Usher’s body. His cock hardened, and his

pulse fired through his form at light speed. Usher held his breath, afraid to move or even twitch. *Damn, I want him so badly it's like a drug!*

"Well," Jarreth's voice rumbled in Usher's ear, shooting more rockets of need through Usher's body, "I guess you're right. Mom must've moved the package, but I'm too tired to hunt for them right now, so we'll use plates."

He stepped back, but only enough to put a few inches between his body and Usher's. Jarreth's gaze met Usher's again, and this time Usher saw... what?

*His eyes look almost hungry.* He gulped again as he wrestled with his libido. *Please kiss me! I promised you I wouldn't do it again, but that doesn't mean you can't do it....*

Jarreth blinked and moved over to the opposite cabinets. "I'll get the plates if you want to find the pizza cutter in that drawer by the stove."

Confused, his cock screaming for release, Usher pulled the drawer open. *I don't know how we can be just friends when I feel like this about him. I want Jarreth so badly it renders me stupid.* With disappointment heavy in his heart, Usher found the cutter, placed it on the isle's top and then sat on his bar chair. He reached for the whiskey and dribbled another shot into his drink.

*This is going to be a long, torturous night.* He put the glass to his lips and gulped.

## Chapter Thirteen

ALTHOUGH exhausted, it took Usher a long time to fall asleep in the guestroom. Later that night, he startled awake. Finally remembering where he was, he patted around on the bedside table until he found his wristwatch and pushed the button on it for the tiny light: four o'clock. He groaned and set the watch back on the table before lying back into the pillows again.

Usher peered into the darkness. Finally his eyes adjusted, and he was able to make out a bit of light seeping around the edges of the curtains. He flung the covers back and rose. Reaching for the curtain, he realized the illumination must stem from a street or security lamp.

*Living in town would certainly be a big adjustment after living in the country for so long.*

He pulled the drape back and stared out at a frosty world bathed in the pale blue-white glow of a streetlight. The road surface wore a deep layer of fresh snow. Every car, trashcan, and lawn ornament hid beneath at least a foot of the white stuff.

*Great, just great. Now I'll worry about Brock and the horses going hungry or thirsty until I'm able to go home.*

An image of the werewolf rose in his mind. Usher shivered and dropped the curtain back in place. The backs of his knees touched the mattress. He sat on it, his mind whirling with all that had happened earlier that night.

*I can't believe everything that has happened! How do I live in a home where I'm going to be scared shitless every night and fret about the horses' welfare?* Usher thought of Jarreth asleep in his room across the hall. *It would be easier if I had someone special in my life, someone who I could love and share a home with.* The memory of the strange incident in the kitchen with Jarreth popped into his brain. *That was certainly odd. It was almost as if he was thinking of kissing me, but I must've made the wrong assumption.*

His thirst proved stronger than his worries, so Usher limped across the dark room and opened the door on his way to the kitchen. He stepped into the hall to find Jarreth's door ajar. A nightlight glowed at the far end of the hall by the bathroom, but the other end of the corridor led into blackness by the kitchen and living room. The hall proved slightly warmer than his bedroom, and somewhere toward the front of the house, the howl of a wind gust permeated the home.

*I hope the temperature doesn't fall any more than it already has.*

Something jingled. Usher looked in the direction of the sound. The tinny noise drifted to him again. Slowly, he padded down the carpeted hall, the fibers soft beneath his feet, and put his hands out to guide him past the hall stands and tables that Una had lined it with. He discovered the table where a house phone perched and ran his left hand along the tabletop as he passed.

Again, the tinkle of bells or coins wafted to Usher. He frowned and took a few more steps.

As he peered down the last few feet of the dark hall, something glinted in the feeble light cast from the opposite end of the corridor. The glow wavered and then turned, facing him. With horror, Usher realized he was staring at something alive.

*Fuck! Those are eyes!*

He stopped cold. Fear sliced through him, and his breath hitched. Had the werewolf tracked them to Una's home and somehow found a way inside to kill them? He couldn't let anything happen to Jarreth.

"Who... who's there?" he said, determined to face the creature.

The eyes vanished, and more jingling followed.

"I said—"

A light popped on. Jarreth stood naked in the kitchen doorway. Both of the Schnauzers trotted out from the kitchen and stood looking at Usher, their little nub tails wiggling to and fro. They trotted into the hall and yipped in greeting as they sniffed his feet and ankles.

"Shh! Be quiet, you two!" Jarreth admonished the dogs. "You'll wake Mom up." He looked back at Usher. "Shit, I forgot you were staying here tonight, man. I sleep in the nude, so since Mom and the nurse aren't here, I got up to get something to drink and didn't worry about putting any clothes on."

"Wait, I'll grab something from your room," Usher said, smiling.

As he turned and hobbled down the corridor, he discretely adjusted his cock in his shorts. *Holy shit! That man has the body of a Greek god!* He gulped and stepped inside Jarreth's bedroom, sliding his hand along the wall where he found the light switch. On a chair by the dresser, Usher found a man's robe. He picked it up and returned to the kitchen. He tossed it to Jarreth and turned around to show his respect, as his friend slipped into the garment.

"Done," Jarreth said. "Thank you."

“No problem.” Usher followed him into the kitchen. “I was on my way in here for something to drink too.”

“Water? Pop? Milk? Juice?”

“Water’s fine,” Usher replied, trying to get the image of Jarreth’s toned and muscled body out of his mind. “For a moment I thought the werewolf had somehow sneaked into the house.”

“What made you think that?” Jarreth asked as he ran water from the tap into two glasses.

“I saw the glow of eyes,” he replied, chagrinned.

“Oh?” Jarreth paused and looked at him with an expression that Usher couldn’t quite label.

Usher pointed at the Schnauzers. “I guess the nightlight at the end of the hall caught one of the dog’s eyes just right. It gave me quite a start.”

“I suppose it did!” Jarreth chuckled softly, and a look of intense relief swept over his face.

Frowning, Usher accepted the glass of water. *Why is he acting so strangely?*

“I have to admit, after last night, my nerves are on edge too,” said Jarreth.

“I know I won’t sleep peacefully again until that thing is caught.” Downing the water, Usher felt better. “Well, I’m going to go back to bed and try to sleep a couple more hours.”

“Me too.”

Usher rose and shuffled down the hall to his room. He shut his door and climbed into bed. *I want Jarreth’s friendship, Usher rolled over and shut his eyes, but I want his love too. I don’t know if I can stand being around him like this for much longer....*

THAT morning, Usher sat at the kitchen isle waiting for the coffeemaker to chug out the last few drops of brew. He rose and looked out the window. The snowfall had exceeded the forecast for last night's storm. It would take a couple of days for everyone to dig out in town, let alone those who lived elsewhere on the mountain.

The sky looked heavy, as if it wasn't done dumping snow. Glancing around the kitchen, Usher searched for a radio, but saw only the thirteen-inch TV. He moved over to it, found the remote, and turned both it and the satellite box on, quickly tuning to The Weather Channel. Another bad weather forecast worried Usher. He couldn't leave the horses and Brock unattended another night.

Jarreth had donned his boots and coat and then took the dogs, Tip and Tap, out for a walk. He'd promised to bring donuts back from the tiny mom-and-pop store on the corner, for their breakfast. Usher glanced at the clock on the range. His friend had been gone about twenty minutes. Usher decided to enjoy a cup of joe and just relax until Jarreth returned.

He poured a mug full of coffee and returned to the high-backed stool at the isle. As he sipped his brew, he mused about whether or not he could remain friends with Jarreth. He desperately wanted both the man's friendship and his companionship, but Jarreth had made it clear he didn't want a relationship with Usher.

*But I want the man's love too.* He shook his head. *I've just got to be patient, that's all. Maybe the more Jarreth gets to know me he'll eventually change his mind.* Usher sighed heavily and set his cup on the Formica top. *The chances of Jarreth*

*suddenly becoming gay are about as good as me hitting the lottery.*

The sound of someone stomping on the stoop and a couple of excited doggy yips alerted Usher that his friend had finally returned from walking the dogs.

The sound of the front door opening reached the kitchen, followed by a waft of frigid air.

“Usher?”

“In the kitchen having coffee,” he called.

Moments later, the Schnauzers burst into the room, their fur glistening with melting snow. They snuffled and sniffed at Usher’s bare legs, their paws wet and cold as they jumped up and down for his attention.

Usher laughed and scratched both of them behind their ears and down their necks. “You two are certainly different from Brock. You’re both like little balls of electricity, buzzing everywhere at once.”

“Tell me about it,” Jarreth said behind him. “But they seem to be the only things of late that truly make Mom happy.”

Usher turned, his breath catching. Jarreth smiled at him, the black hair around his face dusted with white and silver sparkles. However, the man’s eyes shone with worry, and lines grooved the corners of his mouth. In his hands, Jarreth held a box with the words *Mrs. Green’s Donut Hole* on it in black and purple lettering. He placed the box on the counter and returned his attention to Usher.

Dread jabbed Usher in the back. “What’s wrong?” His gaze traveled up and down Jarreth’s body. Even the man’s stance screamed worry and stress. Usher picked up his cup to sip from it again. “Jarreth? I can tell you’re upset, so spill it.”

Raking one hand through his hair, he replied, “Two townspeople were killed last night, and another was found dead about a mile outside town.”

“What?” Usher nearly dropped his mug. He set it on the countertop. “Who was killed? What happened?”

As if he needed to occupy his hands, Jarreth called to Tip and Tap and stepped into the laundry room off from the kitchen. The Schnauzers bounded after Jarreth, but waited for him to step into the kitchen again where he filled their water bowls from the tap.

“Don Smithers and one of his sons were found dead in the bowling alley’s parking lot this morning,” Jarreth began. He gave the dogs their bowls and then returned to open the cabinet under the sink and withdraw a small bag of kibble. “Early this morning, one of the deputies was patrolling the town. He spotted their bodies because Don had parked his four-wheel-drive by the lot’s entrance. I heard he saw something odd sticking out of the snow, so when he stopped to investigate, he discovered the object was a foot, still in its boot.”

Nausea assailed Usher. He closed his eyes and gripped the edge of the kitchen isle until his fingers protested with pain. He knew Don, but not well. The man moved to Stone Trail about six years ago when his wife died, bringing his three sons with him. Don and his oldest son both found work at a local timbering company while Don’s younger two finished high school.

“Which boy was killed?”

“I didn’t hear.”

“Who killed them?” Usher asked, fearing the answer.

Jarreth measured out a cup of kibble for each dog and took a moment to pour the food into their bowls. He stepped into the kitchen again and returned everything under the sink.

Straightening, he replied, “Word is that it was a wild animal. The coroner said there’s bite marks made by a wolf or a dog. The other victim was Jake Rhoades.”

“Jake?” Usher fought the urge to vomit. “He purchased horses from Angie and then from me when I took over the farm.”

“His wife said there was something in the chicken coop, so Jake took his shotgun and went out to check, thinking there was a fox or maybe a raccoon taking shelter from the storm.” Jarreth slammed the sink cabinet shut. “She said she heard the gun go off once, and then Jake didn’t return from the chicken house. After an hour, she went out to look for Jake and found him ripped apart.”

“Heaven have mercy!” Usher folded his arms and placed his head down on them until his stomach settled.

“Stone Trail is in serious trouble,” Jarreth stated softly.

Nodding, his face still buried in his arms, Usher said, “Yeah, it’s called a werewolf, and for whatever reason, I’m the one who seems to have pissed it off.”

“I’ll call Jess and make sure she and Hanna are okay.”

Jarreth moved across the kitchen, his footfalls quiet as he shuffled from one place to another. The volume lowered on the television, and then he began talking on his cell. Moments passed. He bid Jess goodbye.

“They’re fine,” he said to Usher, startling him slightly. “However, Jess said after the deaths in town last night, the authorities took our calls more seriously, and sent a few deputies out to Hanna’s place to investigate. Hanna called her

other farmhands, explained what had happened, and now they have their hands full trying to milk the cattle with authorities there, and the cows bawling because they're engorged."

Slowly, his head suddenly feeling like it weighed fifty pounds, Usher raised it and looked at his friend. "How do we protect Jess and Hanna?"

"Well, I deliver mail to Jess outside of town too," said Jarreth. He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. "She doesn't live too far out of Stone Trail, but far enough for it to be worrisome, and with her kids so vulnerable...." A shudder passed over the man's body. "Getting the authorities to gather folks in one spot for safety might be difficult, if they think the killer is merely a normal wolf or a dog. If the werewolf knows everyone in town is in one place, it would be a prime way to create a massacre."

"What if Jess sends her kids to stay with—" The weather report caught his attention. Another four inches was due throughout the day, and an additional six overnight. "Shit, the weather sure isn't helping matters. Jess won't be able to travel anywhere with her kids in snow like this. And she's had trouble with her car of late, so I'd hate for her to get stranded out in this mess with them. Her husband works away, so I have no idea when he's due home."

"And I'm supposed to pick my mother up today too," Jarreth stated. He sighed and tapped out a number on his BlackBerry. "I'll call the hospital and see if they can keep her tonight as well."

With his mind reeling, Usher rose and poured himself another cup of coffee. As an afterthought, he poured one for Jarreth, too, and placed it on the isle.

Jarreth tossed his phone on the counter. "Son of a bitch!"

“Now what?” Usher froze halfway between the coffeemaker and the isle, his heart thrashing twice as hard.

He shook his head and stared at Usher with a look of utter dismay. “I’m told I have to go get Mom. With all the traffic accidents, cases of frostbite, exposure, broken bones and so on, the hospital only has so many rooms, so they’re sending patients like my mother home to make empty beds for others.” He groaned and passed his hand through his hair again. “I can’t say I blame the hospital, but with the bad roads and the werewolf prowling in town now....”

A shiver wriggled through Usher. He pushed the second cup of coffee toward Jarreth, who picked it up and sipped, his gaze distant.

“Well,” said Usher, “the highway is always the first one around here to be plowed, and it seems that the county tried to keep it cleared last night so it wouldn’t be totally impassable.”

“What are you getting at?”

“I’ll ride back to my place, tend to the horses, and get Brock,” Usher began as he sorted through the details in his mind. “By that time, the roads on the other side of the mountain should be okay to travel. I’ll ride to Statesbury with you, then you and Una can stay with me, if you like.”

“I’m not sure it would be safe there,” said Jarreth.

“Like it’s safe in Stone Trail now?”

Jarreth snorted. “Good point, but Mom would be under stress in a place she’s not familiar with. She’s used to hospital trips and short stays, but with her dementia growing worse, someone else’s home would make her uneasy, and therefore difficult to deal with.”

“Then we come here, and bring Hanna, and maybe Jess here too. Hanna has other farmhands, so they’ll be able to hold the fort down until she returns.”

Jarreth nodded. “That sounds like a plan. At least everyone is under one roof instead of scattered all over this mountaintop.”

“Well, let’s do some checking, find out what roads are bad, and then get in touch with Hanna and Jess.”

“While we’re at your place we should get more guns and ammunition.”

“Right,” Usher said. “Maybe we should do some Internet research on werewolves too. One way or another, this creature needs to be cured or—” He grimaced and shook his head. “Killed.”

## Chapter Fourteen

NINETY minutes later, on the way across the mountaintop, Jarreth stopped at Usher's farm. In the stable office, Usher returned the buyer's phone call, agreeing to meet with him once the weather broke. He checked the horses one last time as they fed on grain and hay, and then he shuffled outside, locking up the barn.

Usher spent the next ten minutes looking around the house for signs of the werewolf and the timber wolf, but found no fresh tracks. Snow weighed down the tree limbs and blanketed everything in sight, muting sounds and smells. The sky threatened more snow, the clouds the color of fresh bruises. Usher shivered and glanced over at the thermometer on a porch post. The temperature held steady in the mid-teens.

He glanced around the backyard one more time. "With all the wind and snow," he said to Jarreth behind him, "there's no way to tell if anything was messing around the barn or house." Usher watched Brock jump and leap through the snow. Every few feet, the dog poked holes in the drifts with his snout and then raised his head and blew flakes everywhere. "Brock seems at ease," Usher added, "so I guess there's no threat."

"Let's go inside and get some more weapons and shells. I don't want to be caught off guard by that thing, regardless of where we might be at the time. With everyone in Stone Trail freaking out, I doubt a deputy will say anything if they see the guns in the truck with us if they're not loaded." Jarreth

stepped up on the porch. “You better kick your heating system up so the water pipes don’t freeze while you’re gone.”

Inside, Usher opened the gun safe, and they gathered a .22 pistol, a rifle, a .410 shotgun and shells and bullets for the weapons. He limped out to the parking area and placed the shotguns in the back seat of the extended cab. Returning to the house, he passed Jarreth carrying a camouflage backpack full of shells and bullets in one hand and the pistol in the other.

Usher halted in the snow-filled path and said over his shoulder, “I’ll grab the rifle and what’s left of a bag of Purina for Brock, then meet you at the truck.”

“Do you have Internet on your cell?” Jarreth called back.

“No, why?”

“You can use my BlackBerry and look up stuff on the net about werewolves while we drive to Statesbury.”

The sound of the truck door opening and closing spurred Usher toward the house. *I hope like hell I can find something useful on the net to help us. If I can’t find something, I don’t know what we’ll do.* In the foyer, he bumped the thermostat up to sixty degrees, grabbed the last items they were taking with him and then locked up the house.

“Brock! Come on, pal. We’re going for a ride!” He waited, and within seconds, the Irish Setter raced around the corner of the house, snow flying into the air from the passage of his body.

“Get in the back, boy,” Jarreth yelled. “Come on!”

Happy to be going for a drive, the dog leapt into the extended cab and sat opposite the weapons.

*At least Brock is having a good time.* Shaking his head, Usher laughed and clambered into the Dodge.

“LUCKILY, The Cannonball is closed tonight,” Jess said. She sauntered into Una’s living room as Brock rushed from item to item sniffing everything. “The kids are at the sitter’s again, so they should be fine. Gloria’s husband is home tonight, so he has the guns loaded, should anything happen.”

Hanna dropped a duffel bag by the coffee table and looked around. “Where’s your mother, Jarreth?”

He hung his coat up on a hall tree. “Mom’s in her room. She seldom comes out once she’s in there. Thank God she’s having a good day. She’s lucid and seems more like the mother I know.”

“I’m sorry, darlin’,” said Hanna. “It has to be so difficult to watch her succumb to dementia.”

Wanting to play, the Schnauzers began tormenting Brock by nipping his ears and barking to get him to chase them. Brock issued a disgruntled snort and looked at Usher as if to say, “Do something with these unruly kids, would you please?”

With a chuckle, Usher called Brock to the laundry room and shut him in it. He stopped to pour himself a cup of coffee and then returned to the living room and sat in an overstuffed chair. Sipping from the mug, he looked over at Jarreth, who nodded, a pained expression crossing his face. *Damn, I wish I could erase the pain and worry for him.* Usher took another drink of brew to hide his feelings. *It kills me to see him hurting like this.*

“It’s getting late,” said Jarreth. He set his boots by the front door and then stepped into the room. “I’ll set up your scanner in the kitchen, and then we can turn on some nice music and start some supper. How’s that sound?”

“Works for me,” said Hanna. “My scanner isn’t doing any good in an empty house and it’ll alert us to any trouble in town should that—” She shivered and made a face. “That thing attack anyone else—God forbid.” Hanna stretched and then rubbed her belly. “Besides, I’m starved. All I got done was to answer the authorities’ questions and deal with bawling cows that needed to be milked. I never got a chance to even grab a snack.”

“There are oranges on the kitchen table,” Jarreth said. “That might hold you until our meal is done.”

“I already walked the dogs while you were picking up the ladies,” said Usher. “I peeked in on Una, too, and she was asleep thirty minutes ago.”

Jarreth nodded. “Thank you.” His gaze met Usher’s, and something strong passed between them. It seemed to fluster Jarreth and he looked away. “Jess, if you don’t mind, would you make a salad while I prep the chicken to bake it?”

“Sure.” She rose and wandered into the kitchen behind Hanna.

He returned his attention to Usher. “Hey,” he said. “Thank you for taking care of Mom while I was gone.”

“No problem. We’re friends, so it’s the least I could do.”

Once again, something overwhelming passed between him and Jarreth. Certain he wasn’t imagining it, Usher allowed a tiny seed of hope to grow in his heart. *Could he have feelings for me? Is it really possible?*

Jarreth cleared his throat and took a step into the hall. “You just sit and relax. You’ve been hobbling around on that bum foot with the dogs and Brock yanking you around in the snow, so let me and the girls fix supper.” He smiled warmly,

holding Usher's gaze longer than necessary then suddenly turned and vanished down the corridor.

Staring after him, Usher shook himself and blinked away his crazy notions. *Jarreth is just grateful, that's all.* However, a thought popped into his head with such force it startled him, and he almost dropped his coffee cup. *I've never seen him even glance in a woman's direction.* He thought back to their night at The Cannonball and sorted through the events of the day as they'd interacted with people at a gas stop and then at the hospital. *Jarreth is always polite and has a smile for everyone, but he never once showed interest in a woman, nor did he check out a lady's ass or even point out an attractive nurse. Am I wrong about him?*

Usher mused for several minutes, but eventually the sound of soft pop music gained his attention. With his coffee cup empty, he rose and made his way to the kitchen. Jess and Hanna joked with one another as Jarreth rinsed chicken and placed pieces of it in a zipper bag of cornmeal sprinkled with a healthy dose of spices and herbs.

"Our local radio station might be little," said Jess, "but they sure do play some great tunes."

"I know," Hanna replied. "I turn it on every time I'm in the barn. If I didn't know better, I'd swear the cows love it too."

Jess and Jarreth laughed at that.

The scanner, perched on the windowsill, let out a shriek. Usher jumped and his gaze zipped to Jarreth's.

A series of codes and coordinates were rattled off by a male voice, followed by, *"Officer down! Officer down! Two civilians dead. Dispatch all available cruisers and the e-squad. Contact the county coroner's office. Over."*

The dispatcher replied, *“Car nine, what’s the location of the perp?”*

*“No perp, dispatch. It’s an animal. A huge wolf, from what I could see. It ran into the woods behind the garage.”*

*“Relay that again, car nine.”*

*“It’s a fucking huge wolf!”*

*“Sending units out now. Be careful, car nine. Over.”*

*“Duly noted. Over.”*

The airwaves fell silent.

“Good God,” said Hanna. “Old man Murphy lives in the apartment behind the shop. I hope he’s okay.”

Jess set the head of lettuce she’d been shredding on the counter. She turned and looked at Usher, her face pale, eyes wide with fear and shimmering with unshed tears. “Murphy was just joking with me the other day, when he fixed my car.” She blinked and two tears, one from each eye, trickled down her cheeks. “He kept teasing me that I was an alien, because any other woman would insist her husband buy her a brand new vehicle.”

A tremble began in the soles of Usher’s feet and traveled up his legs until his entire body felt as though it was vibrating. *This can’t be happening! All these people suffering, but why? What does the werewolf want?*

Usher peeled carrots for Jess to shred for the salad. Across from them, Hanna quietly opened two cans of crescent rolls and placed them on a baking sheet, as Jarreth slid the pan of chicken into the oven to bake. Usher’s nerves were so taut, he feared he’d snap tendons if someone spoke too suddenly or an unexpected noise occurred. He kept glancing over at Jarreth, who leaned against the kitchen isle staring off into space, his face a mask of worry.

"I'm going to go check on my mom," he announced and pushed away from the isle. "The chicken will be ready in about an hour and fifteen."

"Why is this thing attacking innocent people?" Hanna asked no one particular.

"From what I read online," said Usher, "there are all kinds of theories, but nothing definite or proven. The consensus is the lust for blood and sometimes revenge."

"Doesn't it have to be a full moon for someone to change?" Hanna questioned.

Jess nodded. "Yeah, that's what the myths say."

"Some, yes, but others say werewolves can change at will." He glanced down the hall at Jarreth's retreating form.

"Wait," said Hanna. "How the hell do we kill something like this, if it would attack?"

"Every reference I found said silver has to pierce the lycanthrope's body. Otherwise, the only other option is decapitation, but getting close enough to a werewolf to chop its head off isn't an option."

"So what do we do?" Jess asked. "We don't have the means to make or buy silver bullets."

"I don't know, but I'm sure we'll figure out something." He shrugged and walked to the hall. "I'm going to make sure everything's all right."

Usher headed down the corridor toward Una's bedroom, where the door stood ajar. Usher paused and listened, his fist raised to knock.

"Mom, there isn't anything here with fangs, and there's definitely no blood."

"I'm telling you, Jarreth, I saw it," Una replied with conviction. "It has fangs and there's blood. It's in the living room."

"No, Mom. Everything is fine, really."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm positive."

The sound of shuffling footsteps filtered into the hall, and then a television popped on. "Look, that movie you wanted to watch is about to start. You know how you love to watch the Hallmark Channel."

Rustling followed, and then Una said, "Oh, yes. The Hallmark Channel is wonderful. What was the name of the movie again?"

"*Springtime in Winter Grove*," Jarreth said, his tone soft and sweet, as if he were talking to a child.

"Hand me my fuzzy comforter, baby, would you?"

"Yes, Mom."

The exchange between them sent tears to Usher's eyes. He missed his mother, but he could only imagine what Jarreth was going through. *That's one strong man. I don't know if I could handle what he has.* He leaned against the wall, bumping a family photo.

Jarreth emerged and shut the door behind him. "Something wrong?"

"No, I just thought I should check on you and your mom, that's all."

"Heard all that, did you?" Jarreth's eyes shone brightly.

Meeting his gaze, Usher saw Jarreth's love for his mother in his eyes. "Just the last couple of minutes," replied Usher.

“I’m so sorry Una has to suffer like this—that you have to watch this happen to her. Neither one of you deserve this.”

“When it comes to loving someone, you do whatever you have to so you can keep them safe and take care of them. I never understood why some families fight over stupid, petty shit.” His friend sighed wearily. “True friends are few and far between, but family endures.”

He gaped at Jarreth. *I finally find the man of my dreams, a man with a lion’s heart, and he’s straight. I want this man so much it hurts.*

Taking a chance, he put his hand on Jarreth’s shoulder. “Don’t take this the wrong way, okay?”

Jarreth waited expectantly.

“I’ll be here for you, no strings attached. You need a friend, and I’m that friend. Don’t feel bad about leaning on me or just venting.”

The smile Jarreth offered him warmed him all the way to his toes. “Thank you, Usher. I mean that.” He placed his hand on Usher’s shoulder, too, and squeezed. “I think the world of you, just so you know.”

Before Usher could react, Jarreth pulled him into a hug. Stunned, Usher stood still, enjoying the hard warmth of the man’s body.

“I think it’s time to check on supper,” Jarreth said, and he released him. “I also think some before-dinner drinks sound good too.” His eyes briefly met Usher’s before he walked down the hall to the kitchen.

Rooted to the carpet, Usher stared after him, his mind spinning crazily. *He held me longer than necessary.*

## Chapter Fifteen

AS USHER enjoyed the meal with his friends, they all listened to the local radio station. Supper of baked chicken, salad, a cold noodle dish, and the best seasoned cooked carrots he'd ever tasted, filled Usher up regardless of the tension he still felt in the air. He sensed everyone's ears were tuned to the first crackle or pop from the scanner.

Usher stabbed a fat noodle covered in spicy olive oil. *How many townspeople are cowered together in their homes, afraid to go by a window or answer the door?* He ate the noodle, chewing thoughtfully. *Why does the werewolf seem like it has a vendetta with me, and why is it taking it out on others?*

"I'll fill the dishwasher if you all put things away and wipe stuff off," said Jess as she stood with her plate and glass.

"Works for me," said Jarreth.

Usher helped clean up. He placed the bowl of noodles covered with plastic wrap in the refrigerator as Hanna and Jarreth covered the other items.

Minutes later, with a fresh drink in each of their hands, they retired to the living room.

Jarreth motioned to the corner shelf full of DVDs. "Ladies, decide on a movie and put it in the player."

"Damn, Jarreth," said Jess. She walked over to the shelf and ran one finger along one row. "How many movies do you have?"

“Between me and Mom, about six hundred. They range from old black and whites to recent releases.” He laughed. “I watch movies from the shelves more than I do anything on satellite.”

Usher sat down on the loveseat next to Jarreth. He sipped his drink and sighed. Despite the circumstances that put them all under the same roof, he was truly enjoying everybody’s company. The Schnauzers trotted into the living room. One sprawled out on the left side of the coffee table and the other lay down on the right side of it.

“What do you think of this one, Jess?” Hanna asked as she handed her a DVD.

“Oh, good one.” Jess turned and reached over to push the button on the player. “Ultra Violet coming right up, guys.”

The women flopped onto the couch, and Jarreth used a dimmer switch to lower the lights so they could focus on the fifty-five inch flat panel.

As the preview part of the disc ended, Usher’s cell jingled. “Hello?” he said.

“Usher, where are you?”

“Doc Evirgrew?” Panic settled in Usher’s stomach. “Is something wrong?”

Jarreth, Jess, and Hanna all looked at him, their eyes full of trepidation and expectancy.

“Where are you?” the doc asked again with emphasis.

“I’m sure you heard what happened at Hanna Tope’s farm, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, she and Jess are both staying with me at Una Malloray’s home. I’ve had some—” He searched for the right

explanation, not wanting anything to be caught on the airwaves by another device. “Well... uh... some trouble at my farm again, and with the attacks happening in town, we decided to hole up with Jarreth at Una’s place.”

“Look, Usher, the sheriff just finished grilling me about you.”

Startled, Usher said, “What? Why?”

“Supposedly, the authorities found something that led from your farm to Hanna’s, so they think you might’ve had a hand in killing Denver.”

The shock that hit him felt as if it sliced through all his internal organs. The sensation momentarily stole his breath.

“Usher?”

“I’m—” He gulped. “Here, Doc.”

Hanna scooted to the edge of the sofa, her expression fearful. Sitting with her mouth ajar, Jess realized it was open and snapped it shut. She perched on the edge of her seat too. Next to him, Jarreth sent Usher a quizzical look.

Doc Evirgrew sighed and then said, “The sheriff and a couple of deputies are on their way into town. It won’t take long for them to find out where you are, so maybe you should scram.”

“If I run it’ll look like I’m guilty.”

A cry of dismay burst from Hanna.

“Usher, what’s—” Jarreth began, but Usher shot him a sharp look.

Movement caught Usher’s attention. In the doorway, Una stood looking around the living room, her eyes glassy, her face contorted with fear. “Who are you people?” she hollered.

Lunging up from the loveseat, Jarreth approached his mother.

“Well,” Doc continued, “it won’t be long before the sheriff finds you. I thought I should warn you.”

“I’ll just have to deal with it. Besides,” said Usher, his heart thrumming so hard he saw spots, “Hanna knows I didn’t kill Denver. She was there when it happened.”

“The authorities think she’s covering for you,” Doc answered.

“This is fucking ridiculous!” Usher snapped.

“Now see here, young man,” Una groused, shaking a finger at him, “I won’t have that kind of language under my roof!”

“Mom,” Jarreth said, “you should go back to your room.”

“No!” She pulled away from her son. “I keep telling you I see blood and fangs, but you won’t believe me. I see them, Jarreth, I do!”

“Mom, there isn’t any blood and fangs here.”

“I want these people out of my house now!” she screamed, her face darkening with anger.

“Doc, Una is having an episode.” Usher stood. “So I need to hang up, but thanks for warning me.”

“Call me when you find out what’s going on,” Doc said, and hung up.

A thump sounded on the front door. The sound boomed in the foyer, startling Jess and Hanna who clutched one another. The dogs leapt to their feet and began barking. Una let out a shriek of pure terror. Usher jumped and dropped his cell on the floor.

“It’s here!” Una shrieked even louder. “I told you, Jarreth, but you didn’t believe me!”

“That’s the wind, Mom,” he replied. “We’re due to get more nasty weather tonight.”

In her pink slippers, she shuffled over to the curio cabinets.

“Mom?” Jarreth followed her.

“There’s blood on my chapel!” his mother shrieked as she pointed at the wedding anniversary gift.

Jarreth put both his hands on her shoulders and looked over her tousled head. “No, Mom. There’s nothing on the chapel, really.”

“Yes, there is!” she insisted.

A feeling of doom slipped over Usher as he watched the exchange. *Something’s different about this fit she’s having.* He shivered, his gaze zipping from the bay window to Una and then to the hall.

“Darn it, Jarreth, can’t you see the blood on the steeple?” she asked, and stomped one foot. “It’s right there!” She tapped on the glass next to the statue of the church.

“Mom,” Jarreth soothed, “there isn’t any blood on the chapel Dad gave you.”

At the word *Dad*, she seemed to sober. She turned slightly and looked up at her son, her eyes more lucid. “I’m sorry, honey, what were we talking about?”

“You were just telling everyone about your pretty chapel.” A quiver resided in Jarreth’s voice.

The sound of it sent a piercing pain into Usher’s heart. *God, help them both. I don’t know how the man can stand it.*

“Oh?” Una realized there were guests in her living room and brightened. “My husband had that chapel made for my

tenth anniversary present. We'd lost all our memorabilia in a house fire, including everything from our wedding."

"It's beautiful," said Jess.

"Just lovely," Hanna added.

Una crossed the room and then glanced at the bay window. "Jarreth, there's blood everywhere, and I saw fangs in the window again."

Hurrying to her, Jarreth drew his mother to his side. "There's no blood or fangs, Mom. I keep telling you that."

Shaking from head to toe, Usher started to say something to help calm the woman, but decided he should keep his mouth shut when Una looked up at Jarreth with hope.

"Really?" she asked.

Jarreth nodded adamantly. "Yes, Mom. The only thing happening this evening is bad weather. Stone Trail is supposed to get more snow and lots of wind."

"I heard a loud thump a little while ago."

"That was probably just someone's trashcan hitting the side of the house, or maybe a tree limb on the roof."

"Well... okay." Jarreth's mother ambled into the hall, her slippers making soft whispery noises on the carpet. "I want to finish my movie, honey."

"I'll be right back," Jarreth said over his shoulder, and he escorted his mom to her room.

Jess and Hanna looked at one another with tears in their eyes.

"How sad," Hanna stated.

The small dogs kept barking. The more agitated they became, the more Usher's nerves shredded. "I'll put Tip and

Tap in the basement,” he called to the women as he hurried out of the room.

Footsteps behind him forced Usher to turn around in the hall. Hanna followed him into the kitchen where she strode straight to the freezer and removed the ice trays to freshen her drink.

“I’m so damn rattled,” she said, “that I feel like I’m going to burst into pieces.”

“Tip! Tap!” he said loudly. “Come on, boys.”

The Schnauzers raced into the corridor, over to where he stood at the door, and padded quickly down the wooden staircase. He watched as they curled up together in their big dog bed as if they were glad to be out of sight and out of mind. Usher shut the door to follow Hanna back into the living room.

“Okay,” Jarreth announced. “Mom’s back in bed watching a movie. She keeps babbling about blood and fangs.” He flopped on the sofa and let out a frustrated groan. “I don’t know if her meds are causing the hallucination or if it’s the dementia. For a moment there, she was totally lucid, then just as quickly, she slipped back into her dream world again.”

Sympathy for Jarreth filled Usher. He wished he could banish his friend’s stress.

“What was the earlier phone call about?” Jess asked as she peered across the end of the sofa at Usher.

Quickly, he told them what Doc Evirgrew had said.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Hanna exclaimed. Her brows knitted, and the corners of her mouth drew back into severe apostrophes. “I was there when Denver was killed, so how the hell can they think you might have something to do with it?”

"I don't know." Usher let his head loll on the back of the couch. Uncertainty jabbed its claws into his heart, forcing it into a faster gallop. "I have a bad feeling about this and—"

Another, louder thump, hit the front door.

Jarreth jerked and sloshed his drink on his jeans.

"What the hell was that?" said Usher as anxiety sluiced through him.

Jess and Hanna squealed and scooted closer to one another, their eyes wild and glassy with fear.

"Calm down," said Jarreth. "I don't want Mom coming out of her room again. If she freaks out, it takes a long time to get her calmed down again."

A cry ripped from Hanna's throat, and she grabbed Jess so tightly that Jess hollered too. Hanna pointed at the bay window. "There was a huge, black shadow at the window!"

"I think everyone is suffering a bad case of nerves." Usher got up and walked to the window. Cupping his hands around his eyes, he peered through the glass and saw nothing but snow swirling in the streetlights. "I don't see anything out there, Hanna."

"I'm telling you there was something outside the window," she insisted.

"I'll go check the front door," he said. "It's probably just some sort of debris the wind is tossing around."

Jarreth stood. "I'll go with you." He pointed at the women. "You two stay here."

"Don't worry," Jess quipped. "My ass is sucking the springs out of the loveseat."

Despite the tension, Usher burst out laughing as he made his way into the foyer. Behind him, Jarreth chuckled too.

At the door, Usher paused and looked at his friend. "You ready?"

He nodded.

"Here goes—" Usher gripped the doorknob and opened the door to a blast of icy air and a barrage of snowflakes. Something lay on the stoop. He took one step out and knelt, only to let out a startled cry and topple backward onto his butt.

"What is that?" asked Jarreth. He looked over Usher's head. "I see a big rock on the step and a—wait. Is that a—"

"A human hand with a note tied to it," Usher finished. "Make sure the girls don't come out to the foyer." He tugged the piece of paper out from the wire wrapped around the fingers, holding the note in place. Standing, he backed through the door and shut it.

"What's it say?"

Lowering his voice, Usher read the message aloud. "I'm coming for you tonight. I'll kill you first and then I'll rip your friends apart." He held it up for Jarreth to see. "It's in letters cut from magazines and pasted on the paper."

"Who the hell did you piss off?" Jarreth asked, his eyes grave.

"I don't know," Usher said, "but I need to leave so the rest of you aren't in danger too."

"No." His friend shook his head, his mouth flattening into a thin line. "You're not going anywhere."

"Jarreth, I couldn't live with myself if anything happened to you, the girls, or your mom."

"Where the hell are you going to go? Home where you're alone?" he countered, his eyes lighting up with determination. "And what difference does it make anyway? That thing is killing people in Stone Trail too."

“Guys?” Jess called out into the corridor. “Everything okay out there?”

“We’ll be right there,” Jarreth called back. He focused on Usher again. “You’re staying, and I bet the girls will agree with me.”

“Do we tell them about this note and the hand?”

“The note, yes. The hand, no. But we’ll say it was tied to the rock.” He glanced at the door. “That was probably the first thud we heard. It was a method of getting our attention and shaking us up.”

The furnace kicked on, and toasty air blew out of the floor vent, warming Usher’s feet. He used the warmth to help settle his nerves. “We can’t leave the hand on the stoop, especially with the sheriff coming.”

“I wouldn’t touch it. If the authorities don’t show up then we should leave it there until morning. Otherwise, the deputies can find it and then we’ll act shocked.”

Usher raised an eyebrow. “Are you serious?”

“It’ll prove something is after us and that you had no part in Denver’s death.”

“What could the cops have that points a finger at me?”

“Who knows?” said Jarreth. “We just have to play the victims.”

Usher nodded and walked back to the women waiting for them. He explained what they’d found and then he offered to leave.

“No way,” said Hanna. “We stick together. There’s safety in numbers.”

“I agree with Hanna.” Jess stared hard at Usher. “You’ve been my friend for a long time. I’m not letting you put your life in danger.”

“Besides, isn’t everyone in Stone Trail in danger now?” Hanna stated.

Jarreth chuckled. “That’s more or less what I told Usher too.”

“Then I guess it’s settled.” Usher picked up his drink and took a healthy swallow. “We should let Brock out of the laundry room. He seems to pick up on when the werewolf is nearby, so we can use him as our alarm system.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jarreth said. “I’ll let him out.”

*I hope we’re safe tonight. I couldn’t stand it if any of my friends get hurt.* Shaking, Usher sat and sipped from his glass.

## Chapter Sixteen

AFTER the note scare, Jess suggested they return to the kitchen, away from the big window and where the atmosphere was cozier and the bottle of Jack Daniels was easily accessible.

“Pace yourself, Jess” Usher joked. “You don’t want to be shnockerred should there be any trouble tonight.”

“As jumpy as I am,” she replied, “I could probably drink the entire bottle by myself and not even get a buzz.”

“I know what she’s saying,” Hanna said. “I feel the same way.”

“I’m going to go check on Mom real quick,” Jarreth said and left the kitchen.

“How about we play cards?” suggested Usher.

Jess peeked into a few kitchen drawers. “That should help occupy our minds for a while. I’m sure there’s probably a deck of cards in one of these.”

“You look for them,” he said, “and I’ll go make sure everything is okay with Jarreth and Una.”

He wandered down the hall, but as he passed the living room, a sound caught his attention. Pausing, he turned toward the noise. His gaze swept over the furniture, along the carpet and over the bay window.

*I could’ve sworn I heard something.* He stepped over the threshold and glanced around the room again. *Maybe I’m just hearing things.*

He started into the hall and bumped into Jarreth. "Hey, is your mom okay?"

"Yeah, but she's still going on about blood and fangs," said Jarreth. "If she doesn't settle down soon, I'm going to give her one of those sedatives so she'll sleep. I'm at my wit's end." Jarreth started toward the kitchen, but halted suddenly. "Did you hear that?"

Every hair stood up on Usher's body. He shivered. "Did it sound like something tapping on glass?"

"Yeah."

Usher nodded and swept one hand toward the doorway. "I looked around but didn't see anything."

"Hmm. I hate to jump to conclusions, but I don't want to ignore something that might bite us on the ass later." Jarreth walked into the living room and surveyed everything. "I don't hear it now."

A knock on the front door startled Usher. Brock emerged from the living room and woofed softly, ears perked, his attention on the foyer.

Usher looked at Jarreth and found him staring back at him. "I bet that's the sheriff," said Usher.

"I'll answer it."

"Be careful." Usher glanced over at the kitchen doorway where both women peeked out, both with worried, questioning expressions.

"Evening, Jarreth!" a male voice said once he opened the door.

"Sheriff," said Jarreth, "what brings you out here in such nasty weather?" He stepped aside and waved the man into the foyer.

Two deputies walked in behind the sheriff.

"I'm here to speak with Usher. Mind if we go into the living room or kitchen to talk?" Sheriff Kingston asked.

"In here," said Usher.

"I'd like to talk with Hanna too," the sheriff added. "Is she here?"

"Yes," she said from the doorway.

Jess peeped around her, and Jarreth moved to stand next to Usher. The deputies stood near the doorway as if they were sentries guarding a bank vault.

"Usher, I've known you a long time, but I still have a job to do, so just bear with me."

Usher nodded and patted Brock, who sat at his feet, pressing his body against Usher's leg.

"The game warden was at Hanna's farm today," Kingston began.

"Ramsey was at the scene?" Usher questioned.

"Yes," said the sheriff. "Ramsey mentioned that Hanna's farm is easily accessible from yours and that there's even an old road that runs along the fence line between your properties."

Usher crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged. "So?"

"Ramsey mentioned someone could have easily crossed from your farm to Hanna's, killed Denver, and slaughtered those cows. He also said he was meeting me here with evidence to prove you had a hand in killing Denver."

"Hold on, Sheriff," Hanna snapped. "I was in the milking parlor when that—" She glanced at Usher. "Wolf broke in and surprised us. I told you that thing went after the cows, and

that's when Denver ran out of the office and the wolf attacked him."

Sheriff Kingston held one hand up, silencing her before she could say anything else. "My point is that Ramsey pointed out the detail, insisting that Usher was somehow involved. There were no tracks, but then again the weather would easily erase any."

"What are you driving at, Sheriff?" Usher questioned, with dread.

"Son, I don't know why, but Ramsey doesn't seem to like you, and for some reason I can't put my finger on, I get the impression he wants to pin the murder on you."

"Well, that's one thing we both agree on," Usher replied. Surprised, he looked at the sheriff with a different attitude. "So why are you really here?"

"I think Ramsey is full of shit. Why I feel that way, I'm not sure, but I believe your story about someone messing around your farm. The part I can't figure out is how the disturbances are tied to Hanna's place and the murders in town. Yes, there's a rogue wolf attacking and killing people, but what's strange about it is that the kills seem to be done by something intelligent, instead of a wild animal. Wallets were taken from Denver, and from Don and his son too. Same thing with Murphy, plus the safe in Murphy's garage was cleaned out." Sheriff Kingston sighed, took off his hat, and stuffed it in one of his coat pockets. "One thing I do believe is that if someone has been messing around your farm, stalking you and the horses, then they're out to kill you and anyone who you're friends with, Usher."

Usher gaped at the man. *He actually believes me! Do I dare tell him it's not a freak of nature wolf, but a werewolf?*

“So, what do you think I—we—should do?” he asked.

Brock looked at the bay window and growled.

Usher and everyone else in the room focused on the dog. “What’s wrong, boy?” Usher asked.

Another low, menacing rumble issued from Brock.

“Maybe whoever left the hand on the stoop is back,” suggested Jarreth.

“Hand?” Sheriff Kingston swiveled his head toward Jarreth. “Like a human hand?”

“A hand?” the women echoed, fear in their voices.

Brock snarled louder, his lips peeling back as he stared at the window, hackles raised.

“Quick!” Jarreth said, moving toward Jess and Hanna. “You two go to the basement. Take Brock with you for protection.”

“You don’t have to tell us twice,” Hanna replied with conviction. “Come on, Brock!”

“Go on, buddy. Go with the girls,” Usher urged.

Undecided, the dog stayed with Usher, looking from the women and then up at him.

“Go on, boy.”

“Come on, Brock,” Jess called.

Making up his mind, the dog trotted after the women. The sound of the basement door closing reached Usher.

“What’s the point of putting the women in the basement with the dog?” one deputy asked.

“Brock senses when there’s trouble,” Usher said, “so I’d feel better if the women were—” As if someone had just doused him in a bucket of ice water, coldness fell over Usher. “Wait,”

he looked hard at Kingston, “you mean to say you didn’t find a severed hand on the stoop?”

Both deputies looked back and forth between the two. “We didn’t see anything.”

“What are you talking about?” the sheriff questioned, his eyes wide and suspicious.

Quickly, Jarreth told the Sheriff about the thuds they’d heard and the hand and note they’d found.

Usher pulled the message from his pants pocket and passed it to the sheriff. “Here, this is the note that was tied to the severed hand.”

“Whoever left it must’ve returned for the hand.” Kingston shook his head, took a small pad of paper from a coat pocket and placed the note inside it. “I’ll take this to the station for further investigation.” The man sighed worriedly. “Jarreth, I would put someone to keep watch in front and behind the house, but I don’t have any deputies to spare, and the higher authorities won’t arrive in Stone Trail until the weather lets up and the roads are passable.”

“I understand, Sheriff.” Jarreth crossed the room to the big window. He reached up, about to pull the string so he could close the drapes.

The window imploded, showering Usher, as well as everyone else in the room, in shards of glass that peppered his skin and face with slicing pain. A massive black body filled the window frame. The creature snatched up a straight-backed chair and threw it at Jarreth, who failed to react in time. The chair bore Jarreth backward, knocking him flat on his back on the floor. The sheriff let out a shocked cry that blended with the deputies’. He and his men all drew their weapons.

Stepping into the center of the room, the werewolf towered over them. Although taken off guard by the force of the chair striking him, Jarreth kicked it off his legs and somehow scrambled to his feet to back away.

Horried, Usher could only stare at the creature. The tips of its tufted ears brushed the ceiling. It snarled, sounding like a hellhound from the very bottom of Satan's brimstone pool. Coarse black fur, dusted with glittering snow, covered its entire body. The thing stood on two legs, its hands and feet a blend of human and animal characteristics, each digit tipped with lethal ebony claws. The werewolf's long arms matched the length of its powerful legs for running on all fours. Its fangs glistened in the lamplight, and the monster's amber eyes glowed with feral anger. The werewolf turned its head from side to side, making eye contact with first Usher and then Jarreth. It tipped its head back, muzzle to the ceiling, and let out a roar that fired terror through every cell in Usher's body.

Jarreth ran into the hall and returned with the .16 gauge that had been propped against the wall with the other weapons.

"Good God!" Kingston stumbled backward. "It's a fucking werewolf!"

The creature uttered a deep, rolling sound that Usher sensed was laughter. "You're dead, Usshhherrrr!" the werewolf said, its speech guttural as it worked its long canine tongue around sharp teeth.

"No!" shouted Jarreth, as he appeared in the doorway and sighted the shotgun on the creature. He squeezed off a shot, the sound rendering Usher momentarily deaf. The sheriff and the deputies fired their pistols several times too. The bullets ripped into the werewolf, but although it bled, the shots only infuriated it.

“I think all you guys did was piss him off more,” Usher whispered, his entire body quaking.

Jarreth surged across the room and fired again. The shotgun boomed, and the bullet hit the creature’s body with a dull, wet thud. Blood splattered the windowsill behind it. The werewolf shrieked in fury, snatched the weapon from Jarreth’s hand, and tossed it across the room where it hit the DVDs, sending dozens of them crashing to the floor.

“Usher, you and Jarreth get the women and get out of here!” The sheriff rushed the creature as he emptied his pistol. Usher heard the sharp *thwap-thwap* of a couple bullets that missed and embedded in the wall instead. The other bullets hit the werewolf in the upper body, but other than flinching, the beast barely acknowledged the shots piercing it.

The werewolf took several steps toward Usher. It growled and snapped at him. As it drew closer, Usher caught a whiff of blood and something unnaturally wild. He dodged to the left of the creature, but it caught him by one arm and hefted him into the air, his feet dangling.

The pressure on his arm forced a cry of pain from him. At any second he knew his arm would be rent in two or yanked from his body. *I’m going to die*. He uttered another pitiful cry as more pain pierced his arm. *It’s going to tear my arm off like it did to Denver*.

“Let go of him!” Jarreth leapt at the beast, swinging the shotgun, the butt end of the weapon catching it across the hip.

The werewolf maintained its grip on Usher’s arm, squeezing harder as it whipped around to confront Jarreth. The sudden motion and added pressure shot more pain into Usher’s shoulder, and he cried out again. The room swung to

and fro as Usher's head lolled on his shoulders like he was a rag doll.

Jarreth swung the gun again, connecting with the creature's gut. "I said to put him down, asshole!"

Howling angrily, the werewolf flung Usher across the room. He flew backward, his body turning slightly in midair. It seemed almost like slow motion as he passed through the air. If the situation had been different, the amazed expressions on the sheriff's and the deputies' faces would have been almost comical. Something hit his backside, followed by the sound of shattering glass and then a hard, unyielding surface made contact with Usher's back. He fell to the floor in an explosion of glass, porcelain, ceramic, and china. Debris rained down on him, the tinkles and crashes so loud to his ears it numbed his mind.

Stunned, he looked up to see something blocky, with a long silver point, tumble straight for his face. *Una's wedding chapel!* He jerked his head to the side just in time, but the little church still cracked him on the cheekbone. Pain radiated into his eye and along his temple and jaw line. Blinking the agony away, he saw only stars dancing in his vision.

Usher rolled to his side, glass cutting his forearm and hand. He sat up, shook his head, and glanced up just in time to see the werewolf snatch the sheriff and one deputy up in each taloned hand. It flung the deputy into one of the bookshelves, where he fell to the floor unconscious. Shrieking like a demon, the beast tossed Kingston through the doorway. The sheriff bashed against the corridor wall, breaking through the plaster. He slid to the floor, bits of white wafting around him, and sat still.

The second deputy fainted where he stood. His pistol dropped to the floor, and he lurched to the side where he fell

onto the loveseat, bounced off, and flopped face down on the carpet.

In pain, his senses spinning, Usher struggled to his feet and swayed to and fro for a moment.

“Stay still!” Jarreth commanded, his voice sounding strange.

“Yessss, stay still, Ussshher,” the werewolf mocked in its guttural way of speaking. “It makes it easier for me to kill you.” The creature faced him and took two steps closer, its muscled dog-like legs rippling with power. “You’ve been a thorn in my side for too long.”

“You’re evil,” Jarreth said. “Only a Mist Wolf defending itself against an evil one can make a true werewolf.”

Gaping at his friend, Usher frowned, his head spinning with sounds, sights, and fear. *Mist wolf? What the hell is he talking about?*

The creature didn’t even look at Jarreth. “It doesn’t matter. I am what I am and I enjoy killing.” It leered at Usher and licked its snout. “Especially when it’s a murderous queer!”

“You son of a bitch!” Jarreth shouted, his voice rumbling like thunder. “What right do you have to judge people?”

Usher turned toward Jarreth, the odd quality of his friend’s voice urging gooseflesh over his battered form. *What the hell?* Mesmerized by Jarreth’s movements, it was as if the man was slowly stalking the werewolf. He put the shotgun on the coffee table and took another step, his body moving in the stealthy manner of a predator. *Something isn’t right about this.*

“I’ve waited a long time to kill you,” the werewolf snarled, snagging Usher’s attention. “But now I don’t care if I’m seen. I’ve had a taste of killing.” The creature snapped its teeth together and then added, “And I really, really enjoy it.”

“Why me?” asked Usher. “What did I ever do to you?”

“You and your pretty-boy lover are the reason my brother’s in prison until he’s an old man,” the werewolf slurred. The pupils of its eyes grew larger. It bared its fangs. “And you must pay for that.”

Shock coursed through Usher. He struggled to process the new information. After all these years, the brother of the man who caused Zander’s death had come to pay him his first and last visit.

“Your brother is the reason Zander is dead,” Usher whispered. Anger, sadness, disbelief and hostility roiled in the pit of his stomach. “His overdeveloped sense of competition and ego caused Zander to be thrown off the mechanical bull. His neck was snapped!”

“My brother was merely playing a joke on the pretty gay guy, that’s all,” the werewolf snapped and moved closer.

Movement drew Usher’s attention to Jarreth. And his friend vanished. His body just suddenly poofed into smoke, his clothes falling to the carpet in a heap. He then solidified into the form of a large black-and-silver timber wolf—the wolf Usher had seen at his farm.

## Chapter Seventeen

THE wolf leapt into the air, snapping its teeth at the werewolf's jugular.

"Oh! Just look at my living room!" A female voice squealed from the doorway.

Twisting toward the voice, terror slapped Usher. "Una, no! Go back to your room, now!"

She stomped toward Usher in her frilly pink house slippers, her face twisted in anger and dismay, but she dodged him when he reached out for her and went straight to her smashed curio cabinet. "My stuff! Who broke my cabinet?" she shrieked. Stooping, she picked up the chapel. "Oh, how horrible. Jarreth? Who did this? Who's responsible for breaking my things?"

The beast avoided the wolf's fangs, but the timber wolf's teeth tore into the side of its head instead, ripping a big patch of fur from just below one of its ears. The sound of their snarling and howling was deafening.

The werewolf reached around the timber wolf and grasped it by the scruff of its neck. It flung the wolf away, its body flying through the air. Usher looked up in time to hold his arms out. The wolf smashed into him. Usher tried to break its fall, but the big wolf bore him backward. His heel caught something, and he fell with the wolf, landing flat on his back with the animal on top of him.

"Oomph!"

The timber wolf leapt to its paws and stood between Usher and the werewolf. Growling, it bared its teeth, daring the creature to take one step closer.

“Jarreth, don’t,” Usher said softly. He placed a shaking hand on its back.

The wolf didn’t look at him, but it issued a soulful whine before growling again.

“Did you do this?” Una screeched at the werewolf.

“Shut up, bitch,” the creature garbled out. It suddenly lunged toward the woman.

“No!” Usher yelled, his heart jerking so hard he wouldn’t have been surprised to find it lying on the floor in front of him.

The scene happened in a blink, and at the same time it seemed to go on forever. Usher took one step toward Una, to shove her out of the way, just as the timber wolf jumped into the air and landed on the werewolf’s back. The beast grasped Una by her upper arms, her small, delicate hands still clutching her precious wedding chapel. The creature bared its fangs, going for her throat, but she lost her footing, which threw the beast off balance. Falling backward, she landed on her back in the pile of glass and broken trinkets. The werewolf fell on top of her, the timber wolf on the creature’s upper back, its teeth sunk deeply into the muscle of its shoulder.

The thud of the three bodies sickened Usher, but the werewolf screamed in pain and lay still.

“Get off me!” Una hollered. “Get off!”

The timber wolf transformed into mist. It swirled into a tall column and morphed into Jarreth, who stood naked next to the werewolf. “Usher, help!”

He scrambled over to them, sliding on glass and ceramic, and helped Jarreth roll the creature off of Una. The beast

whined and slowly wrapped its big, clawed paw-hands around the item piercing the center of its chest.

“Look what you did,” Una scolded, as Usher helped her to her feet and brushed debris from the back of her robe. “My husband gave me that little chapel for my tenth wedding anniversary and you fell on it!” She jerked away from Usher’s grasp, leaning over the beast.

“Mom, no,” Jarreth said and reached for her.

She used both hands and tugged the chapel from the werewolf’s chest. The long, silver steeple pulled free covered in blood and tiny bits of muscle. “Bastard!” She kicked the beast in the ribs. “This is the only thing I have left of my beautiful marriage and you got it all dirty.” She turned, glaring at her son. “Next time I tell you I see blood and fangs, you better listen to me!”

“Yes, Mom,” Jarreth said, his tone subdued, eyes wide with disbelief.

“Good.” She nodded. “I’ll be in the kitchen cleaning my chapel, honey.” Una walked away, muttering to herself about rudeness and uninvited guests.

Clutching his throbbing arm with his other hand, Usher met Jarreth’s baffled eyes. They smiled at one another and then both snorted with amusement.

“This isn’t,” the werewolf gasped as it began to transform back into human form, “how it’s supposed to happen.”

The long, coarse hair covering its body retracted, and the sound of snapping and popping bones caused Usher’s belly to flip-flop. He grimaced at the noise, but couldn’t tear his gaze away from the bizarre transformation. Gradually, the werewolf’s muzzle and ears shrank, and his fangs turned into the normal incisors of a human being. Muscles and tendons

flexed and rippled as the man's arms and legs returned to normal. Finally, naked and mortally wounded, he gazed up at Usher with glassy eyes.

"Ramsey?" Usher stammered.

"Holy shit!" Kingston said. He staggered across the living room, grabbed an afghan from the loveseat, and tossed it over Jarreth's naked backside.

"Thanks," Jarreth said, wrapping the spread around his body. The sheriff swayed, and Jarreth steadied him.

"I can't believe Ramsey's a werewolf," the sheriff breathed. "Hell, I never believed werewolves were real, but it sure as hell explains a lot, doesn't it?"

Jarreth nodded. "Did you see me... uh... change?"

"Yes," answered Kingston, "but don't worry. I won't say a word. Who would believe me?" Wide-eyed, he stared down at Ramsey. "Why, Ramsey? What's the reason behind all of this death and destruction?"

"His brother is the man who caused my partner's death, eight years ago," Usher supplied, suddenly realizing why Ramsey had always seemed familiar to him. He remembered him from the trial, the man's vicious gaze always boring through him. Feeling very tired, he added, "He went to prison for involuntary manslaughter."

"It was a joke," Ramsey wheezed, as blood coursed through his hands, clasped over the gaping hole in his chest. "It wasn't my brother's fault that his lover fell from the bull and snapped his neck." He coughed, and red liquid squirted from his mouth to trickle over his chin. "He had a wife and kids, a good job." Ramsey gasped for breath, as his color turned ashen. "I vowed someone would pay for my brother's life behind

bars, so I put in for a transfer to Stone Trail and planned my revenge.”

“But why kill innocent people around Stone Trail?” Jarreth asked, his tone simultaneously puzzled and disgusted.

“Because—” Ramsey gulped, and shut his eyes to open them again. “The thrill of the kill is unlike anything I’d ever felt before. It’s like a drug that made me feel so... so good.” He gasped, and his face contorted into a grimace.

“How’d you become a werewolf, Ramsey?” the sheriff asked.

“He’s dead,” said Usher. The game warden stared at him with fixed, glazed eyes.

“How the hell am I supposed to file a report and all the pertinent paperwork on something like this?” Kingston asked no one in particular.

Usher clapped the man on the back. “Make up a story about a man who snapped.”

The sheriff nodded. “Yeah, I guess.” He sighed. “I better check on my deputies.” He turned and limped across the room to one of the deputies who had begun to wake up.

“Fuck,” said Jarreth. He let out a low whistle. “I bet all of this was a ploy to get you and some deputies here with all of us so he could murder everyone.”

The sheriff’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “Why?”

Jarreth ticked the points off on the fingers of one hand. “One, he was bent on getting even with Usher. Two, the guy just admitted he got high off the thrill of killing people. And three, with you and two or more deputies here, he’d murder you, which would wipe out half of the town’s police force. It would take weeks, possibly even months, before he’d have any authorities to deal with as he killed others around Stone Trail

while the weather is so bad. No one can access the mountaintop until the roads are passable. By the time they did, Ramsey would have his alibi set in stone.”

“Thank God for Una, and thank God, too, that she’s all right,” Usher stated as a chill raced along his body. “I can’t explain it, but someone or something worked through her to save us.”

They all stared at one another as the truth of the matter sank deeply into their brains.

The deputy moaned. Distracted, Kingston helped him sit up.

At that moment, Usher became aware of the dogs, barking crazily at the top of the basement stairs. “Poor Brock probably thinks the worst has happened to me.”

“Is your arm okay?” Jarreth asked, his eyes brimming with concern. “Do you need a doctor to look at it?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Usher shook his head and worked the offended shoulder in small circles. “If Ramsey had squeezed it just a little more, it probably would’ve broken, but as it is, I think my arm’s going to be black and blue.” He smirked. “At least he didn’t rip it from my body.”

Jarreth raised his eyebrows. “Thank God.” He glanced toward the hall. “I’ll call down to the girls so they know it’s safe to come upstairs, but we should keep the dogs confined down there until everyone clears out of the house.” Quickly, Jarreth grabbed his underwear and jeans, donning them. “Let me take care of Mom,” he said over his shoulder to Usher, “and then when everyone clears out of here, we’ll clean up this mess. Later, though, we’re going to have a long talk.”

Dread pooled in Usher’s gut. “We are?”

Turning to face him, Jarreth smiled. He walked over and took Usher in his arms, embracing him in a warm, full body hug. “Yes,” he whispered, “we are.”

At his touch, every inch of Usher’s skin felt electrified. Words failed him. He could only stare at the man. His brain scrambled to come up with something, anything that would freeze the moment in time.

THE ambulance took one of the deputies to the clinic for a few stitches, and the coroner’s van arrived to cart Ramsey away to the clinic’s tiny morgue. After Jarreth convinced his mother that he’d replace her curio cabinet with one even more beautiful, he managed to get her to go to her room so they could finish cleaning up the living room.

She clutched the chapel against her breasts as if it was a newborn baby. “Honey, I’m sorry your father passed the Mist Wolf trait on to you.” She stared up at him with tears shimmering in her eyes. “It seems to make your life miserable, doesn’t it?”

Sorrow assailed Usher for Jarreth and his mother. They seemed to have gone through a lot during their lives. *Did someone know his father’s secret, so they set the house on fire to rid the world of a freak and his offspring?* Anger and a fierce sense of protectiveness passed through Usher. He shook his head and balled his fists in frustration. *Why does the world have to have such prejudice in it? Aren’t we all freaks in some manner or other?*

“Mom,” said Jarreth, “I don’t regret who I am. You have your little chapel that Dad gave you, but you also have me through Dad, and nothing will change that.”

She reached up and trailed her fingertips over Jarreth's stubbly cheek. "Oh, baby, you are such a good man. You make me proud." She stood on tiptoe and kissed her son's chin.

Tears pricked the backs of Usher's eyes.

"Well," Hanna called from the foyer, "that's the last of the emergency crews and the police." She entered the living room in front of Jess.

"Your neighbor directly across the street," Jess added, "brought over a big piece of pressboard and a roll of heavy-duty plastic to cover the broken window."

"We'll cover the window as soon as I get Mom settled in her bedroom," said Jarreth. "Come on, Mom." He looked at her with such fondness that Usher wished he could see his mother again.

She started toward the hall, but stopped, her eyes growing large and round. "Jarreth, honey? What happened in here?"

Jarreth closed his eyes, his lower lip trembling, but he quickly opened them again and said, "Nothing, Mom. Now let's get you back in your bedroom, and you can put in the new DVD I bought you."

"What did you get me?" she asked.

"The most recent season release of *CSI: Miami*."

"Oh, that sounds lovely," she said as she carried the chapel into the corridor. "I love that show. Do you think I could have a cup of peppermint tea too?"

"Sure thing, Mom."

When they were out of earshot, Hanna said, "I don't know how he does it. She seemed fine and then suddenly she's gone again."

“Jarreth’s a good man,” Jess said. She shot Usher a meaningful look.

He offered her a wan smile. *Message received, my friend.*

Usher telephoned Doc Evirgrew and told him everything that had transpired. Relieved, the doc insisted that Usher call him should he need anything.

A few minutes later, he helped Jarreth clean up the glass, and the girls vacuumed three times to make sure all the slivers were caught. After the night nurse arrived to stay with Una, and Tip and Tap were happily asleep on the bedroom floor, Usher and Jarreth helped the women gather their things. They put their bags in the Dodge, hollered for Brock, and loaded into the truck.

First, Jarreth dropped Jess off at The Cannonball, where her husband and children picked her up to take her home. Next, as he followed the highway across the mountain, he drove slowly through the areas where the wind drifted the snow across the lane.

“Good grief,” Hanna said behind Usher, “I don’t think I’ve ever been so tired.”

Usher chuckled and turned to look back at her. “Tell me about it. All that worry, anxiety and stress, then suddenly it’s gone—”

“And you just want to find someplace warm and comfortable and crash for a week,” Jarreth finished.

Usher laughed, and Jarreth and Hanna joined him.

A wall of snowflakes hit the truck.

“Looks like the next wave of snow has hit the mountain,” said Usher.

From the backseat next to Hanna, Brock sneezed, as if voicing his opinion of more snow.

She laughed softly. "I know how you feel, pal. I can't wait for springtime either, especially after this past week."

Minutes passed, and finally Hanna's lane appeared in the headlights. Jarreth turned left into the drive and traversed the slick, snow-drifted road.

"You sure you're ready to stay here alone?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she replied. "I've survived a werewolf, so I think I can survive some solitude, too."

"That's a good way of looking at it," Usher said.

Jarreth stopped the truck in front of the big farmhouse. Hanna got out and tugged her bag out with her.

"I'll walk you to the door," Usher offered.

"No." She shook her head, the ties on her hat swinging with the action. "I'm okay." She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Guys, thanks for being there for me."

"If you need anything," Jarreth said, "don't hesitate to call one of us."

"Thank you!" She slammed the door shut.

Jarreth waited with the headlights beaming on the snowy path to the house. Slipping and sliding, Hanna made it to the porch, pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the door. She turned and waved before stepping inside and shutting the door.

Back on the highway, Usher sat silently. He looked askance at Jarreth a couple times. *I can't believe he changed into a wolf. Apparently werewolves exist, too, so Jarreth being able to transform like he did shouldn't surprise me.* Hanna is right, though. The past week has been incredible.

"Need help feeding the horses?" asked Jarreth as he pulled into Usher's driveway.

“Nah, but if you want to build a fire in the fireplace so I can turn the furnace down, that would help a lot.”

“Sure, not a problem.”

Behind them, Brock woofed softly and poked his head between the front seats.

Ruffling his pet’s ears, Usher said, “I take it you’re glad to be home again, pal?”

Brock whined in agreement and licked Usher’s face.

“Yuck!” He laughed. “A simple woof would’ve been enough.”

“Keys?” asked Jarreth as he shut the engine and lights off.

Usher took the house key off the ring and handed it over. He hopped out of the pickup, let Brock out and then limped to the office door and let himself in.

Outside, Jarreth called, “Come on, boy, you’ve watered enough snow drifts. It’s cold out here!”

Laughing, Usher took his time feeding the horses and talking to them. *It seems like I’ve been gone for weeks instead of just a few hours, but it sure is good to be home again.*

One of the geldings poked his nose over his stall and nudged Usher’s coat front.

“Sorry, fella, no sugar cubes tonight.” He rubbed the yearling between the eyes.

The horse snorted and passed his big velvety lips over all the coat pockets just to be sure Usher wasn’t holding out on him.

“I’m just thankful none of the rest of you were hurt or killed after the filly.” Usher took a few minutes to toss hay into the stalls and then filled the water buckets. “Good night, gang.”

He locked up the stable and shuffled to the house. Navigating the path that had filled in with snow proved quite a feat. By the time Usher reached the front door, his bum foot had begun to thump with pain. He hobbled inside and removed his winter garb.

Remembering the weapons in the truck, Usher started to put his coat and boots back on, but shook his head. “Aw, fuck it. We can get them tomorrow.”

Usher glanced at the first door leading into the living room. *Why aren't the lights turned on?* He noticed Brock sprawled in the kitchen doorway, his head pointed toward the second living room doorway. *Why isn't Brock in the room with Jarreth?* He stepped into the doorway and stopped, his mouth dropping open. *Holy shit! What's Jarreth...? Why is he...? Holy shit!*

A fire roared in the fireplace. Yellow and orange flames danced and wavered as they licked at the dry wood. Jarreth had pushed the coffee table out of the way and spread a comforter on the floor, with several pillows stacked against the bottom of the sofa. On the stone hearth sat two flickering candles, a bottle of whiskey, two tumblers, a two-liter of soda and an ice bucket full of ice cubes. On the opposite side of the fireplace sat a bottle of pain reliever and a small one of liniment. Lying on his side, Jarreth propped himself up on one arm. Nude except for a pair of briefs, he looked up at Usher.

“Took you long enough,” he quipped with a wide, endearing smile. “The house key’s on the kitchen table.”

Usher shuffled into the room and stood, taking in the scene. “I... I wanted to make sure the horses were okay.” He gulped, his cock jumping to attention and pressing painfully against his zipper.

“Well—” Jarreth patted the opposite side of the comforter. “Come over here and make yourself comfortable. The heat from the fire feels wonderful, and while you settle yourself, I’ll make you a drink. I want to tell you about myself and what and who I am. If you care about me like you say you do, then you need to know about the Mist Wolves.”

In a daze and unable to take his eyes off Jarreth’s beautiful body, Usher padded toward him and knelt on the comforter.

## Chapter Eighteen

USHER looked hard at Jarreth. “Are you playing with me?” The quiver in his voice embarrassed him, but he maintained eye contact.

His friend met his gaze. The fire and candlelight sparkled in the dark depths of his eyes. “No, I’m serious, Usher.” He sat up, grasped the hem of Usher’s shirt, and tweaked it. “At least take this off so I can see your arm.”

*What is he up to? He made it clear he’s not gay, but—fuck! Has he been lying to me about this the entire time?*

Usher shrugged out of his flannel shirt and tossed it over a nearby ottoman.

“Come here and let me see what Ramsey did to you.”

Obeying Jarreth, Usher scooted over to him, where the firelight would shed plenty of illumination on his arm.

“Damn,” said Jarreth. “Your arm looks like it’s been beaten with a baseball bat. By tomorrow it’s going to be solid black and blue.”

“It’s stiff and sore, but not as bad as I thought it was going to be.”

“Here.” Jarreth shook three pills into Usher’s palm. “Take these.” He reached for a glass of water on the end table and passed it to him too.

Usher swallowed the pills. “Thanks.” He put the glass on the hearth. “What’s this all about?” he asked, sweeping one hand over the blanket.

Jarreth sat back against the pillows, his skull braced on the sofa cushions, and folded his arms behind his head. “My father’s family resides around Stone Trail. They’ve been on this mountain for three centuries.”

“You said—”

“That I moved to Stone Trail from Miami.” Jarreth nodded. “I did, but my father met my mother here, and when her family and his were against them marrying, they moved to Miami where he was offered a job in construction. Things went fine until I turned ten. Someone saw my father transform into a wolf, so they began threatening Mom and me, wanting us ‘freaks’ out of town. When the house fire happened, Dad’s family took him back in, so he returned to this mountain with us, living on the opposite side from Stone Trail. Later, once I graduated college and couldn’t find a job in such an economically depressed region, I returned to Miami to work. Dad passed away five years ago, and the rest of my background and Mom’s you already know.”

“Where are you going with all of this, Jarreth?” Although intrigued, Usher didn’t want to hope for something that Jarreth wasn’t willing to give.

Jarreth sighed heavily and closed his eyes. “Look, Usher. I lied to you about several things.”

Dread descended over Usher. “Lied to me? About what?”

“I pretended that I didn’t know what was going on when you told me about someone causing trouble on your farm.” Jarreth opened his eyes and met Usher’s gaze. An ember popped in the fire, blasting glowing chips across the hearth. He

sat up and picked up the poker to tend the fire. "One Saturday afternoon about a month ago, I'd changed into my wolf form to run through the woods and enjoy being in my alter form. I came upon a werewolf that had killed a buck and was feeding on it."

"Ramsey?"

"Yes, but at the time I didn't know that."

"You said a Mist Wolf defending itself against someone evil could make said person a werewolf."

Jarreth nodded. "It's one of the drawbacks of being a Mist Wolf. Our magical essence turns into a toxin when it mixes with evil." He shook his head sadly. "I'd heard rumors that one of the Mist Wolves had bitten a man who was pushing himself on a woman of the Stone Trail Mist Wolf Clan, but I've never been able to find out who had bitten Ramsey."

"So, you were the wolf I saw prowling my farm and watching the house. You suspected the trouble around my place was caused by the werewolf that killed the filly?"

"Yeah." Jarreth sighed. "But you saw me a couple times, so I had to be careful."

"I just thought you were a normal timber wolf." He sat cross-legged and stared into the fire, his mind a jumbled mass of thoughts.

"You almost caught me last night in the hall. I was about to go outside and prowl so I could see what I could find out around town, and suddenly there you were in the hallway." He chuckled. "You scared the shit out of me. I had just enough time to transform back into human form."

Usher snorted in amusement. *I can't believe I'm having this conversation. I'm crazy about the guy and he's a Mist Wolf.*

“Thanks for saving my life the other night in the woods,” said Usher. Emotion bubbled up within him. “If you hadn’t been there—”

“But I was. And now Ramsey is gone. He won’t bother or hurt anyone else.”

“So you found my hat in the woods and brought it to the house, didn’t you?”

Jarreth smiled, nodding.

“So, how or why are you a Mist Wolf?” Usher asked. He frowned at the way he’d phrased the question. “I mean, where do the Mist Wolves originate from? I didn’t believe werewolves were possible, but how can a human turn into mist and reform into a wolf?”

Jarreth smiled, the expression so damn sexy Usher struggled with his libido. All he wanted to do was pull the man into his arms and lay him on the comforter beneath him.

“Well, when Adam and Eve were created,” Jarreth explained, “why is it so improbable other races of humans, ones with special abilities such as shape shifting, were created too?”

Usher studied him for a moment as he marveled over Jarreth’s logic. “I never thought of it that way, but it makes me wonder who else is out there besides Mist Wolves.”

“Indeed.” The lopsided grin Jarreth offered him kicked Usher’s heart into overdrive, and his cock twitched with need.

Usher almost groaned aloud with pure sexual wanting. He couldn’t keep his feelings to himself any longer. He had to be honest with Jarreth.

“I can almost see the cogs turning in your head,” said Jarreth. “What’s on your mind?”

*After what we've gone through together, we're both idiots if we're not honest with one another.* Usher wanted Jarreth as his partner, to live together as a couple, to be there for one another, support one another.... *I have to tell him. It's now or never.*

"Usher, talk to me."

The way Jarreth spoke to him sent a wave of gooseflesh over Usher's body. He turned and met his friend's gaze. The flames' reflection gyrated in Jarreth's onyx eyes.

"I love you, Jarreth," Usher replied. The admission freed him and he surged onward. "I want to be with you forever. After Zander died, I never thought I'd be able to find someone to love again, but you've changed all that. You're all I think about, dream about. I need you in my life. You're a part of me whether you like it or not."

"I like it," said Jarreth.

Usher blinked. "What?"

Laughter burst from Jarreth. "I said I like it. I love you too, Usher."

He blinked again. "What?"

Jarreth laughed harder. He crossed his arms over his midsection as he laughed so hard he couldn't catch his breath.

*He loves me!* Usher smiled from ear to ear. *I can't believe it, but he does!* Usher started chuckling, too, and the more he laughed, the more tickled he became.

"If you were falling for me," Usher said, "why didn't you kiss me that first time in my kitchen?"

Finally, a couple minutes later, Jarreth calmed himself enough to say, "I knew what my heart was telling me, and the attraction to you was—and is—overwhelming, so I had to be sure about you and that I didn't have a simple case of raging

lust.” He shrugged. “Besides, I figured if there was something more between us at the time, it would cloud your thinking and you’d get hurt. I didn’t want you dwelling on me and letting your guard down enough that Ramsey took you by surprise.”

“I see what you’re saying,” said Usher.

“And that’s why I seemed distant when you fell off the porch and I landed on top of you. I wanted you so badly I could’ve melted the snow in the entire front yard.”

Delighted by his admission, Usher grinned from ear to ear.

“Look,” Jarreth said seriously, “there’s something else I have to tell you. Whether or not we’re a couple depends on your reaction to what I have to say.”

Sobering, Usher nodded. “Okay, tell me.”

“I’m sorry for lying to you about my feelings for you, Usher.” Sitting up, Usher braced himself with his palms flat on the comforter behind him. “The thing with Mist Wolves is that we do have some true wolf traits. We choose one mate, and that’s for life. That’s the other reason I had to act like I wasn’t gay. I’ve wanted you since that day I wrecked my mail truck.”

Usher smiled broadly. “I can’t believe this!”

“The other thing is that when we have sex for the first time, we’ll be mates for the rest of our lives.”

“I’m fine with that,” said Usher as excitement coursed through him. “I want us together forever.”

“I’ll penetrate you and then bite your neck, marking you. It’ll hurt,” Jarreth added, “a lot.”

“Bite me?” A bit of trepidation visited Usher. “Do you mean like a quick bite that will make me say ‘ouch’ or something else?”

“I’m speaking of my fangs coming out and me biting you as if I was in wolf form.”

Usher gulped. “Oh.”

“Changing your mind?” Worry settled in Jarreth’s eyes.

A nervous chuckle escaped Usher, and he replied, “No, I’m not changing my mind, but I’m not a fan of pain, either.” He placed his hand on one of Jarreth’s ankles and passed his hand up his shin, the fine, dark hairs silky against his palm. Jarreth’s eyes darkened to black, and Usher smiled. “Look, I love you, Jarreth. After Zander’s death, I didn’t think I’d ever be able to love again, but you changed that. What’s funny is all this time I thought I was chasing the mailman, when the mailman was actually chasing me.”

Jarreth chuckled as he leaned forward and caught Usher’s hand, pulling him up along his body. The sensation of Jarreth’s lean, muscled form shot an arrow of desire straight to Usher’s cock. It twitched, hardening, lengthening, and once fully erect, it pulsed with intense need that proved painful. Usher sucked in an excited breath. It had been so long since he’d been with someone, he feared coming too early.

“Our first time together might not last long,” he said. “It’s been a while since I’ve been with anyone.”

“Same here,” Jarreth whispered. “Come here and kiss me.”

Usher straddled Jarreth’s hips as Jarreth clasped both sides of his face and kissed him gently, but as the kiss progressed, it became firmer, more demanding. Jarreth traced his lips with his tongue, inspiring a deep moan from Usher. Finally, Jarreth broke the kiss and looked into Usher’s eyes.

“We better put Brock in one of the bedrooms so he doesn’t interrupt us,” Usher whispered, his breathing erratic.

“That’s why he’s in the kitchen. I told him to stay put and not bother us.”

“You told him?” asked Usher.

“You commented on how I have a way with animals,” Jarreth replied. “I have a bit of the wild in me, remember?” He passed his hand over one of Usher’s pec muscles.

The sensation of his rough palm on his chest stoked the fire building in Usher’s loins. “Will I become a Mist Wolf too?”

“No, but you’ll belong to me until one of us dies,” Jarreth answered, his tone serious. “Mist Wolves have longer lives than typical humans. Most live to be well over a hundred. However, that trait will become yours too. Nature has seen fit to bless our non-Mist Wolf mates with long life spans as well.”

“Make me yours,” Usher whispered as his heart flailed hard and crazily. He needed to be with Jarreth, to belong to someone again. “Bind us as one.”

Jarreth rolled Usher to the side so that he lay on the comforter alongside the hearth. The fire crackled loudly, and a sudden pop of an ember startled them both so that Usher laughed and Jarreth’s chuckles joined his. The flames grew brighter for a few moments and then died to a gentle orange glow that bathed Jarreth’s body in amber light as he tugged Usher’s underwear down his legs. He tossed them onto the sofa and then quickly wriggled out of his and threw them over to land with Usher’s.

Usher couldn’t take his gaze off of Jarreth, whose prick stood eager and proud, the thickness of it marbled with subtle blue veins. He swallowed hard, imagining how Jarreth’s cock would feel inside his body. *I’ll be speared on it, filled up and made complete. Fuck, I can’t wait to feel him enter me!* Like a pebble tossed into a placid pool of water, a tremor began inside

Usher and traveled over his form in vast ripples that left him breathless and panting for ultimate release.

“Are you ready?” Jarreth asked.

“Oh, yes!” Usher scooted down so that the pillows cushioned his head. The fireplace bathed him in warmth, and the comforter slid deliciously along his skin.

“Unless you tell me to stop now,” breathed Jarreth, “you’re mine for now and always.”

Usher was never so certain of anything in his entire life. “Take me,” he said breathily. “Make me yours.”

From under a throw pillow by Usher’s head, Jarreth retrieved a bottle of lube. He set it on the hearth to warm and then began kissing Usher from his knees upward. He rained delicate kisses up each thigh, licking the sensitive inner regions of the muscles, his tongue hot and slick.

“Jarreth... please!”

“We need to work up to the moment,” Jarreth said, his mouth against the crease of Usher’s leg where it joined his hips.

“No,” he gasped. “I want you now—please!”

“Let me tease you first.” Jarreth moved up over Usher’s abdomen, his tongue swirling over his skin.

“Jarreth... ah, fuck! I have got to have you inside me before I explode.”

Chuckling in an oh-so-sexy manner, Jarreth pulled Usher farther down on the blanket. He picked up the lube, opened it and squeezed a dollop out on his fingers. As his digits touched the crack of Usher’s ass, Usher’s cock pulsed hard, and electricity seemed to zing through his nerve endings.

“Oh... my...,” Usher wheezed. “Hurry, Jarreth. I want you so badly.”

“Don’t you want to make it last?” Jarreth teased.

Shaking his head, Usher croaked, “It’s been too long. I want you so fucking much!”

Jarreth finished spreading lube into Usher’s ass crack. He positioned himself between Usher’s thighs and moved forward so that his cock squeezed in between his cheeks.

Desire swirled through Usher, and he sucked in a shaky, excited breath. He gripped the tops of Jarreth’s hips to help guide him.

“You are mine,” said Jarreth as he pushed into Usher.

Usher bit his lower lip, concentrating on the pain so he wouldn’t come too soon. His anus muscle gave way, and Jarreth shoved farther inside Usher, who gripped Jarreth’s hips so hard his fingers protested. Inch by inch, Usher’s body received Jarreth.

“Oh yes!” said Usher. “All of it, Jarreth. I want all your cock inside me.”

The burning in his ass grew more intense, but Usher welcomed it. It had been so long since he’d been with someone, and now, with Jarreth, he not only had the physical part of a relationship, but the love to go with it too.

Jarreth braced himself on his palms, his arms supporting his rigid body. “Okay,” he gasped, closing his eyes for a moment, “one more push, and I’m all the way in. Ready?”

“Yes!”

With a final shove, Jarreth buried his cock to the hilt, and Usher snapped his legs around his new lover’s, pulling him closer, forcing the root of Jarreth deep into his ass.

Jarreth rolled back onto his butt and brought Usher up with him. He wrapped his legs around Usher's hips, cradling him. Jarreth's cock penetrated him deeply. Usher began rocking back and forth, the need to come overwhelming. He snaked his arms around Jarreth's torso and tucked his head into his partner's neck.

"Fuck!" Usher hissed. "Oh, yeah! Fuck me, Jarreth! Harder! Harder!"

They rocked to and fro, Jarreth's prick rubbing every sensitive spot. Usher gasped over and over, reveling in the sensations shooting throughout his body like fireworks. Even his toes and fingers tingled with feeling.

"I'm going to bite you so that we're joined as mates," Jarreth breathed, his face against Usher's neck. "Are you ready?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Do you want me to make it quick, or do you want it long and slow?"

"Make it quick."

Before Usher could brace himself, Jarreth bit down on his trap muscle. Pain seized Usher. He stiffened and cried out. Heart beating out an insane tempo, he arched against Jarreth, who held him firmly by both his fangs in his muscle and his arms around his body.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Usher whimpered, still thrashing against his lover, but as he did so, it drove Jarreth's cock even deeper into his body.

"Mmm!" Jarreth murmured against his shoulder. "Mmm, mmm."

Warmth trickled over Usher's back and down his chest. *Holy shit, he's drawn blood! I'm bleeding like crazy!* Jarreth

kept pumping his cock into him, and Usher responded by wiggling on it, wanting it deeper still. *The pain....* He closed his eyes. *The pain of his fangs in my neck is so intense, but... but it feels so good too.* His cock, wedged between his abdomen and Jarreth's, throbbed so hard Usher couldn't believe he hadn't spurted all over Jarreth by now.

Soon the pain faded, and as Jarreth kept a grip on him with his fangs, a slow, lazy burn, one both heady and intoxicating, began spreading throughout Usher.

"I feel—" He sucked in a breath, "—like I have liquid flames coursing through my body," said Usher.

Jarreth let go of him with his mouth. Blood coated Jarreth's fangs, and although startled by the sight of them, Usher also found them highly erotic and fascinating.

"It's part of our bonding," Jarreth said, his breathing heavy. "Although the initial bite hurts, nature saw fit to make the bonding bite pleasurable too." He leaned in and licked the wound. "Now, prepare yourself, my love."

"Prepare—?"

Jarreth bit down in the same place. Startled, Usher screamed as intense pleasure shot through his body. He bucked on Jarreth's cock, and within moments, Usher felt Jarreth's member throb within him. Jarreth tensed, arching repeatedly, impaling Usher on his prick over and over.

"Holy hell! Fuck!" With frenzy, Usher rode Jarreth's cock. "You feel... so... damn good!"

A tingling began in the base of Usher's spine. It spread into his hips and then coursed into his balls and thrived there until he was certain they'd explode. The feeling mounted until Usher whimpered and groaned. Finally, the searing sensation flamed through his cock, and with a shout of release, Usher

came, his rod throbbing and pulsing as it shot cum between his body and Jarreth's. He howled his release, coaxing every drop onto his lover's belly.

Spent, he leaned into Jarreth, who rolled them to their sides, where they lay panting. Together, they watched the flames leap and crackle in the fireplace.

Usher had never felt so complete. "I love you, Jarreth," he whispered as the heat of the fire and his contentment nudged him toward sleep.

"I love you too." Jarreth replied. "We're mates forever."

Smiling, Usher closed his eyes.

## Chapter Nineteen

USHER awoke to find daylight streaming in through the picture window and Brock wedged between his body and the foot of the hearth, where he soaked up the fire's warmth.

"Hey, pal." He reached over and patted the dog's side. "How are you today?"

Brock raised his head and promptly sneezed.

Chuckling, Usher replied, "I take it that you're doing well then?"

The dog rubbed his head against Usher's shoulder and let out a loud, contented groan.

"Where's Jarreth, hmm?"

He sat up and threw a blanket off of him. Finding his underwear, he picked them up and stepped into them, jerking them up over his hips and adjusting himself. Although his ass was a little sore, it was a good feeling. He paused and considered his commitment the night before, and the euphoria that had rocketed through his body at Jarreth's every touch. His cock twitched, but as Usher took one step forward, his foot protested the pain that pierced it. He grimaced. His foot had grown stiff during the night, but that was a sign of healing, so he spent a few moments wiggling his toes and gently flexing his foot to rid himself of the discomfort.

Finished, he half walked, half hobbled out into the hall and into the kitchen, where he discovered Jarreth coming inside with an armload of firewood.

“Hey.” He smiled. “Good morning, lover. How do you feel?”

The warm, fuzzy feeling that passed over Usher nearly turned his legs into pure pudding. “I’m fantastic,” he replied as he relished the sensation. “In fact, I’m better than fantastic.”

“I hope you don’t mind, but you were sleeping so well that I let you stay by the fire, and I went out to the barn and tended the horses for you.” Jarreth stomped snow off his boots before heading down the hall.

He returned and kicked off his boots by the door.

“Have you checked on your mom this morning?” Usher asked.

“That was the first thing I did when I rose,” said Jarreth. “The nurse is staying with her. We got about eight more inches of snow last night. Three more are expected today, and another six to ten tonight, so I guess we’ll be snowed in for a few days.”

Usher detected the worry in Jarreth’s voice. “Will Una be okay?” he asked.

Jarreth nodded as he hung his coat on a peg by the door. “Yeah, the nurse will stay with her as long as necessary. She won’t drive in these conditions either. It’s just that I always feel guilty when I’m away from my mother for more than a day.”

“Jarreth,” said Usher, “I’ll do whatever I can to help you with your mom.”

A bright smile crossed his lover’s face. “Thank you, Usher.”

“What’s for breakfast?”

Jarreth smiled so broadly it shot a thrill through Usher. “Me,” said Jarreth. He took Usher’s hand and walked slowly so he didn’t cause him any additional pain, walking on his bum foot. He led him into the living room. “Go to the kitchen, Brock, and stay there for a while.”

The dog stared at him with big, soulful eyes as if to say “You’re boinking again? You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Go on, boy,” Jarreth added.

With a huge, disgruntled snort, Brock rose, stretched, shook his coat, and took his time padding across the living room and into the hall to vanish into the kitchen.

Usher laughed. “I think Brock feels you’ve had his master’s attention long enough.”

“I beg to differ,” Jarreth said and pulled Usher into his arms. He kissed his neck and checked the wound where he’d bitten him. “This is healing nicely.”

“Jarreth, do you think the matter of Zander’s death is truly over?”

His partner looked at him quizzically. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Well—” Usher nestled his head against Jarreth’s neck. “If Ramsey was bent on revenge for his brother going to prison, what about the rest of his family? Do you think one of the others will come to get even, especially when they learn of Ramsey’s death?”

“I don’t know,” Jarreth replied. He hugged Usher. “But if they do, we’ll deal with it *together*.” Sighing heavily, he added, “No matter what, no one is going to split us up or ruin what we have together.”

“Good!” Usher hugged him back. His heart was so full of emotion he didn’t know how it was holding it all. “I love you.”

“I love you,” Jarreth said, stepping back. “Now let me show you how much.”

Usher shook his head. “Nah, it’s my turn.”

“Oh?” Jarreth quirked a dark eyebrow.

He nodded, laughing. “I have a few tricks up my sleeve that will make you holler.”

Pulling off his shirt, Jarreth then tossed it on the recliner. He turned and smoothed the comforter and blanket.

As he straightened, his hair tousled and his chest rippling with his movements, Usher’s breath caught. *Zander, wherever you are, I hope you’re happy. And I want you to know I’ve finally found happiness too. I’ll always love you, baby, but now it’s time for me to move on.*

Jarreth finished undressing and lay on the floor. “Well?” He offered Usher a smile that twisted his insides with longing. “What are you waiting for, baby?”

“I’m just admiring the view,” said Usher, “and saying a mental goodbye to someone who I’ve held here with me in the world too long.”

Jarreth’s gaze met Usher’s. The understanding within his dark orbs inspired tears to prick the backs of Usher’s eyes.

“Tell him you’re in good hands,” said Jarreth. “Tell him, too, I’ll love you forever just like he does.”

“I think he knows that.” Usher took his shorts off and lay down with Jarreth.

Rolling Usher onto his back, Jarreth began kissing his belly and massaging his pecs as he traveled lower and lower still. Usher sighed and looked over at the window, where snowflakes twirled and spun. *It’s going to be a long, long winter, but I’ll enjoy every moment of it with Jarreth.*

As Jarreth nipped a very sensitive part of Usher’s body, Usher closed his eyes and allowed his love for his partner and the sensations he created to carry him away.

AMBER REDD is the M/M fiction alias of author Kiyara Benoit. She resides in the mountains with her family, two dogs, and several cats that she saved from an animal shelter. Amber loves to write erotic romance so hot it melts the hinges off the bedroom door, and anything paranormal makes it twice as hot!

When you pick up one of Amber's books, you'll find vampires to demons to lonely schoolteachers and dark, brooding men. Just be prepared for surprises and scorching love scenes.

For more about Amber and her fiction or to pick up one of her free eBooks, visit <http://www.kiyarabenoiti.com/> or sign up for her newsletter at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BSB\\_HotRomances](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BSB_HotRomances). You can contact her at [kiyarabenoiti@hotmail.com](mailto:kiyarabenoiti@hotmail.com).

The background of the entire advertisement is a black and white photograph showing the silhouettes of two men's heads and shoulders in profile, facing each other in a close, intimate pose. In the upper left corner, there is a white diamond-shaped logo containing a black spiral design.

*Dreamspinner*  
Press

For more of the  
best M/M romance,  
visit

*Dreamspinner Press*

[www.dreamspinnerpress.com](http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com)

Chasing the Mailman ©Copyright Amber Redd, 2011

Published by  
Dreamspinner Press  
4760 Preston Road  
Suite 244-149  
Frisco, TX 75034  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Art by Reese Dante <http://www.reesedante.com>

This book is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via any means is illegal and a violation of International Copyright Law, subject to criminal prosecution and upon conviction, fines, and/or imprisonment. This eBook cannot be legally loaned or given to others. No part of this eBook can be shared or reproduced without the express permission of the Publisher. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Dreamspinner Press at: 4760 Preston Road, Suite 244-149, Frisco, TX 75034 <http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

Released in the United States of America  
March 2011

eBook Edition  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-673-6