

The Howl at Black Lake

by Jason Wightman

A Michigan Dogman Romance

Scene 1 — Arrival

The blue Subaru crunched up the frozen ruts of the dirt road. Mara Ellison gripped the wheel, her knuckles white against the cold. The lake's frozen surface groaned under the ice. The cabin, her grandfather's cabin, loomed out of the dark, its weathered boards a deeper black against the snow. The headlights flickered over the 'Ellison' carved into the cabin's lintel.

She had driven north past Gaylord with the radio fading in and out, country stations giving way to static. The last gas station had been a lit island in the dark, the attendant's breath fogging as he filled her tank. After that, nothing but pine and snow and the long dirt road, and the quiet pressing in from both sides. Detroit felt a thousand miles behind her. That was the point.

Mara stepped out into the cold, the snow creaking beneath her boots. The key turned stiffly in the lock, but the door swung open with a familiar creak, revealing the cabin's single room. The smell of pine and old smoke enveloped her. The kerosene lantern on the table cast long shadows on the walls. She could almost see Grandpa Walter's silhouette in the corner, whittling at a piece of wood, his pipe smoke curling in the lamplight.

She set to work, her hands steady and sure, calloused from years of tending to Detroit's broken. Kindling went into the wood stove, a match struck, and she watched as the flames took hold. The cabin began to warm, the old boards popping and cracking.

Mara unpacked her car, bringing in bags of groceries and her duffel, the zipper's metallic rasp echoing in the silent room. She stacked cans of beans, a loaf of bread, a bag of apples, a jar of coffee, and a box of kerosene on the counter. Her eyes fell on the photograph of Grandpa Walter, young and strong, standing at the dock with a freshly caught walleye. She touched his image, a smile tugging at her lips, remembering his stories of Black Lake's legendary creature, the Dogman.

The cabin was quiet, save for the occasional pop of burning wood and the

soft scrape of her spoon against the tin. Mara ate supper standing up, watching the flames through the stove's glass door. The silence was a balm, a far cry from the ER, where even the quiet was loud. This year had been hard, harder than the others. A year of gunshot wounds and overdoses, of old men dying alone while their families watched on a phone screen, had driven her north, seeking quiet.

As dusk deepened, a sound echoed through the woods. A howl, long and low, almost like a man in pain. It was unlike any wolf howl Mara had heard before, more resonant, almost human. She stilled, listening. It came again, resonating in her chest. She felt a shiver, not entirely from the cold.

Mara grabbed the kerosene lantern, its flame casting long shadows on the walls. She stepped outside, the snow crunching underfoot. The cold air stung her cheeks. She walked to the woodpile, her boots leaving heavy prints in the snow. There, in the fresh snow, were tracks. Dog-like prints, but walking on two legs, stride too long, claws dug deep. She knelt, tracing the edge of a print with a gloved finger. Fear prickled her skin, but curiosity held her there.

Back inside, Mara barred the door, the wood sliding home with a solid thunk. She leaned against it, listening. The howl didn't come again, but the silence seemed heavier now, as if the woods were holding their breath. She climbed into the loft, pulling the blankets tight around her. The lantern cast flickering shadows on the slanted ceiling.

Mara lay awake, her mind racing. She remembered Grandpa Walter's stories, his voice deep and steady in the firelight. "The Dogman," he'd say, "is no ordinary creature. He's a guardian of the woods. Some say he's a man cursed, others say he's a man blessed. But he's always there, watching." She decided she would look again in the morning, in the cold light of day. For now, the night belonged to the woods. She had come for a week, a respite from the city's noise, a chance to heal. And heal she would, even if it meant facing whatever was out there, howling in the night.

Scene 2 — The Man in the Woods

Dawn split the sky, grey and reluctant, as Mara pushed open the cabin door. The world outside was frozen, snow clinging to every pine needle, every branch. Her breath misted in the cold air. The tracks from the night before lay clear and untouched, leading her into the heart of the woods. The scent of pine was heavy, the silence so deep it seemed the forest held its breath.

The prints led her deeper, to a hollow oak ridge where the ancient roots sprawled in the snow. There, caught in a poacher's wire snare, lay a man. Tall and broad, his dark hair streaked with grey at the temples, he wore an old flannel shirt and boots worn thin. His amber-brown eyes watched her warily, a wild animal caught in a trap. Blood seeped from a deep gash on his calf, staining his jeans dark, the wound's edge wet and raw in the meager light. Beside the snare she saw its anchor wire, staked deep, and boot prints in the snow — big men, two of them, come and gone before dawn.

"Leave," he growled, his voice low and rough. "I heal fast. You should not have followed me."

Mara approached carefully, her hands outstretched, palms open. "I'm a nurse," she said, her voice steady. "I've got a kit in my bag. Let me help you."

He tracked her movements, his gaze never leaving hers, as she knelt beside him. The snare was buried deep, the wire biting into flesh. She could see the muscle twitching, could smell the metallic tang of blood. She opened her bag, pulling out her grandfather's old hunting knife. Its blade was sharp, honed by years of use, the metal cold in her hands.

"I'm cutting the snare," she said, her voice calm, giving him warning. The wire sang as she sliced through it, the tension releasing with a snap. He hissed in pain, his hands clenching the snow, claws showing at his fingertips. She unwound the wire, careful not to cause more harm, then

bound the wound with gauze from her kit, her nurse's eye assessing the depth, the blood loss, what the wire had done.

"It's deep," she said, her brow furrowed in concern. "You'll need to rest it. Can you walk?"

He nodded, pushing himself to his feet. He leaned on her, his weight heavy but controlled. She felt the tension in him, the coiled strength of a man used to carrying his own weight, even injured. They walked slowly back to the cabin, his steps measured, careful not to cause her pain. The cold bit into her fingers as she held him upright. Twice he stopped to rest, his jaw set, sweat cutting lines through the dirt on his face despite the cold. He did not complain. He did not ask her name until they were nearly at the cabin.

"Mara Ellison," she said. "Walter's granddaughter."

Something eased in his face at that. "Silas," he said. "Walter left food at the treeline. Every winter, for years. I never thanked him."

"You can thank me instead," she said. "By healing."

"Who set the snare?" she asked as they reached the porch.

"Kessler," he said, the name flat in his mouth. "Dale Kessler, from Onaway. He has hunted me for years. He sets wire where I walk. He will come looking for what his snare caught."

She coiled the cut wire and set it on the table by the door, where she would see it every time she went out. Evidence, and a reminder.

Inside, she fed him the rest of her beans and bread, the smell of the simple meal filling the small room. He ate silently, his eyes never leaving her. She brought him blankets, made up the bed in the loft. He climbed up, his movements careful, wincing only slightly at the wound. He was a large man, his shoulders broad, his limbs long. The loft barely contained him.

"Rest," she said, her voice firm, giving orders like she would in the ER. "I'll check on you later."

She watched him from the doorway, his form outlined against the blankets. His eyes caught the lamplight, reflecting it back like an animal's. There was

something wild about him, something untamed. She wondered at the men who had set the snare, who hunted here.

As she turned to leave, she heard him speak, his voice soft in the quiet room. "Thank you," he said, his words barely audible. She nodded. She would nurse him back to health. And she would keep the cut wire. Kessler would answer for it.

Scene 3 — The Truth

The dawn was a hesitant thing, the sun a faint blush behind the clouds as Mara stepped out of the cabin. The world was still under its snowy blanket, the silence heavy and profound. She breathed in the cold air, the scent of pine and snow filling her lungs. Her boots crunched in the frozen crust as she walked to the woodpile, her breath misting in the air.

Back inside, she found Silas awake, sitting up in the loft. He watched her as she moved around the cabin, preparing breakfast. His leg was still bandaged, but the wound had closed significantly overnight. She frowned, her nurse's eyes noting the impossible rate of healing. She poured him a mug of tea, climbing up the ladder to hand it to him.

"You should rest it," she said, her voice calm, her eyes steady on his. "It's not healing like it should."

He took the mug, his fingers brushing hers. "I heal fast," he said, his voice low. "It's one of my... gifts."

She nodded, her brow furrowed in thought. "There's something you're not telling me, isn't there?"

He looked at her, his amber-brown eyes catching the light. "Yes," he admitted, his voice barely audible. "There is."

She sat down beside him, her gaze never leaving his. "Tell me," she said, her voice firm but gentle. "I can't help you if I don't know the truth."

He took a deep breath, his hands wrapping around the mug. "I am the Dogman of Black Lake," he said, his words measured, careful. "The creature your grandfather told stories about."

Mara nodded, her eyes widening in realization. "The tracks," she said, her voice soft. "The howls."

"Yes," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I was born this way, Mara. It's not a curse, not a bite. I am old, and there are few like me left."

She looked at him, her gaze steady, unflinching. "Show me," she said, her

voice calm, sure. "Show me who you are."

He looked at her, his eyes searching hers. "May I show you?" he asked, his voice soft, respectful. She nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. He stood up, his movements careful, controlled. He walked to the center of the room, standing before the wood stove, its flames casting long shadows on the wooden floor.

Mara watched as his form began to change. His bones lengthened, his muscles shifting under his skin. Dark fur sprouted, covering his body, his hands lengthening, claws curving from his fingertips. His face elongated into a wolf-dog head, his amber eyes watching her warily. He grew taller, standing seven feet tall on his hind legs, his broad shoulders looming over her.

He knelt down, making himself smaller, his eyes never leaving hers. She could see the tension in him, the coiled strength of a wild thing held in check. She could feel the fear rising within her. But she did not run. She reached out, her hand trembling slightly, and touched his fur. It was soft, surprisingly warm despite the cold air.

He shifted back, his form changing fluidly, seamlessly. He stood before her, his human form tall and broad, his amber eyes steady on hers. He waited, his breath held, his eyes searching hers for her reaction.

Mara looked at him, her gaze steady, sure. "I'm not afraid of you," she said, her voice soft but firm. "You're just... different."

He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "I've lived alone in these woods for a long time," he said, his voice low, rough. "I've never had someone see me like this, accept me."

She took his hand, her fingers intertwining with his. "Tell me about it," she said, her voice gentle. "Tell me about your life."

He looked at her, his eyes on hers. "I was born here, in these woods," he began, his voice soft, hesitant at first, gaining strength as he spoke. "My mother was like me, but my father was human. He left us, couldn't accept what we were. My mother raised me alone, taught me how to live in these

woods, how to survive. She died when I was young, but not before she taught me everything she knew."

Mara listened, her heart aching for the loneliness of his life. "And your grandfather?" he asked, his voice soft. "He knew about me, didn't he?"

She nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. "He did," she said, her voice warm with memories. "He used to leave food at the treeline, for you. He told me stories about the Dogman, about how he was a guardian of the woods, a protector."

Silas looked at her, his gaze steady. "He was a good man," he said, his voice soft, respectful. "I miss him."

She squeezed his hand, her thumb brushing against his knuckles. "He missed you too," she said, her voice soft. "He always hoped you'd find someone to share your life with, someone who could understand you."

He looked at her, his eyes searching hers. "Do you think... could you ever...?" He trailed off, his words left unspoken, hanging heavy in the air between them.

Mara looked at him, her eyes steady, sure. "I'm not afraid of you, Silas," she said, her voice soft but firm. "You're just... different. And I like different. It makes life interesting."

He looked at her. Then he leaned in, his hand cupping her cheek, his lips brushing against hers. She kissed him back, her eyes closed, her heart pounding in her chest. It was a simple kiss, a promise of more to come. A promise of acceptance, of understanding, of a shared life in these woods.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, casting its light on the snowy landscape, Mara and Silas talked late into the morning. They talked about his long life in these woods, about his loneliness, about her grandfather's kindness. They talked about the lake in winter, and the work of keeping a cabin warm, and the long quiet years. And as the day wore on, Mara knew she was not afraid of the Dogman of Black Lake, and not afraid of the life he offered her. She knew she would stand by his side, come what may.

Scene 4 — The Den

The woods whispered around them as Mara and Silas walked side by side, their boots sinking into the deep snow. The sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows that danced and swayed with the wind's whispers. Silas led the way, his steps measured, careful not to cause her harm. His leg was healed, the wound closed, but she knew he was still tender, still recovering from the poacher's snare.

They walked for what felt like hours, the silence heavy and profound. The trees stood tall and silent, their branches heavy with snow, casting long shadows across the snow. Mara could feel the cold seeping into her bones, the wind's bite sharp on her cheeks. But she did not complain. She was here, in these woods, with Silas. And that was enough.

Finally, they reached a hollow oak ridge, its ancient roots sprawling like gnarled fingers. Silas stopped, turning to face her. His amber-brown eyes watched her warily, like an animal caught in a trap. "This is it," he said, his voice low, rough. "This is where I live."

Mara looked at the ridge, her brow furrowed in thought. "Your den?" she asked, her voice soft, respectful.

He nodded, his eyes never leaving hers. "Yes," he said, his voice barely audible. "But it's not... it's not what you're used to."

She took his hand, her fingers intertwining with his. "I'm not afraid," she said, her voice steady, sure. "Show me."

He led her into the hollow, his steps sure, careful. The den was a dry cave, its walls lined with blankets and old books. A fire pit smoked gently in the center, the smell of woodsmoke heavy in the air. Dried fish hung from the ceiling, their scales glinting in the firelight. Mara could see his life here, could see the care he took in maintaining this space. She could see the books, their spines worn, their pages dog-eared. She could see the carvings on the walls, the stories etched into the stone.

Silas watched her, his eyes searching hers for her reaction. She walked

around the den, her fingers brushing against the blankets, the books, the walls. She could feel the history here, the weight of years lived in these woods. She turned to him, her eyes catching the firelight.

"It's beautiful," she said, her voice soft, sincere. "It's you."

He smiled, a small, shy smile that lit up his eyes. "Thank you," he said, his voice barely audible. "I've lived here for a long time. It's... it's my home."

She nodded, her eyes taking in the den. "It's a good home," she said, her voice warm with approval. "You've taken care of it, of yourself."

He led her to the fire pit, where he had laid out a simple meal of dried fish and berries. They sat down, their knees touching, their breath misting in the air. He told her stories of the lake, of the years he had spent here, of the lives he had seen come and go. She listened, her eyes on his face, taking all of it in.

In turn, she told him about the hospital, about the lives she had saved, about the ones she had lost. She told him about the noise, the chaos, the endless stream of patients that had driven her away, had forced her to seek solace in these woods. He listened, his eyes never leaving hers, his heart aching for the weight she carried.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the cold deepened. She moved closer to Silas, seeking his warmth. He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close, his body radiating heat.

"You're cold," he said, his voice soft, concerned.

She leaned into him, her head resting on his shoulder. "It's getting cold," she admitted, her voice soft. "But I'm not ready to leave."

He looked at her, his amber eyes warm. "We could go back to the cabin," he suggested, his voice low, hesitant. "We could build up the fire, make it warmer."

She looked at him, her eyes steady, sure. "We could," she agreed, her voice soft. "But... I want you to stay, Silas. With me. Here."

He looked at her, his eyes searching hers. "Are you sure?" he asked, his

voice soft, respectful. "Are you sure you want this? Me? All of me?"

She took his hand, his human hand, scarred from years of living in these woods. She looked at it, then looked at him, her eyes steady, sure. "I want all of you, Silas," she said, her voice firm, sincere. "The man, the beast, the legend. I want you."

He looked at her. Then he leaned in, his hand cupping her cheek, his lips brushing against hers. She kissed him back, her eyes closed, her heart pounding in her chest. It was a slow, deliberate kiss, a kiss of choosing, of accepting, of loving.

When they finally pulled apart, their breaths misting in the air, he held her close a moment longer. "I'm sure," she said. "I want you, Silas. All of you."

"The snow is deep," he said, his voice low. "And you are cold. May I carry you home?"

She nodded. "Yes."

He stood, and his form began to change. His bones lengthened, his muscles shifting under his skin. Dark fur sprouted, covering his body, his hands lengthening, claws curving from his fingertips. His face elongated into a wolf-dog head. He grew taller, standing seven feet tall on his hind legs, his broad shoulders looming over her.

Mara looked at him, her gaze steady. She reached out and touched his fur. It was soft, and warm despite the cold air. He bent and lifted her as if she weighed nothing, cradling her against his furred chest. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her head resting on his shoulder. He carried her through the woods, his great strides sure in the deep snow, the stars shining down from above.

Finally, they reached the cabin. Silas set her down gently, his hands lingering on her waist. Then his form changed again, bones shortening, fur drawing back, until he stood before her in his human form, tall and broad, his breath misting in the cold. She looked at him. "Stay," she said, her voice soft and sure. "Stay with me."

He stepped inside. She closed the door behind him, shutting out the cold, shutting in the warmth. The fire cracked in the wood stove, casting long shadows on the floor.

And there, in the soft glow of the firelight, Mara and Silas stood together, their hands entwined. They had found something worth keeping. And they knew, as they looked into each other's eyes, that they would stand by each other's side, come what may.

Scene 5 — The Night

Mara's fingers traced the ridged scar on Silas's left hand, following its path across the palm and up to his index finger. The clawed tip rested against her wrist.

"May I?" she asked.

He turned his hand over, exposing the full length of the scar. "Yes."

Her fingertips followed every ridge, every dip. The fur was soft around it, dark, the scar itself a pale line through the pelt.

"What happened?" Mara asked.

"Fighting another shifter. Northern pack borders." His amber eyes held hers, steady. "Seven years ago."

She looked up at his face—all of it. The wolf-dog muzzle with its blunt nose and rounded ears, the intelligent golden eyes, the strong jaw with its fringe of fur. Seven feet tall standing there, shoulders broad enough to block out the lantern light from behind him.

"You're beautiful," she said.

Silas blinked slowly. His hand closed around hers, careful with his claws. "Mara."

Her name in that rough voice sent heat through her chest. She pulled his flannel shirt up, exposing his chest—hard muscle beneath dark fur, the defined planes of abs, human skin at the center while fur covered everything else. The transition was seamless, perfect.

"May I?" she asked again.

He watched her with those golden eyes as she drew the shirt over his head. His arms went up, letting her undress him completely. She unbuttoned his jeans, pulled them down over his hips—human legs, fur-covered below the knees, massive thighs that flexed as he stepped out of the denim.

He was already hard, already straining against nothing. His cock hung

heavy and thick between his legs, and Mara's breath caught. The base was human, dark skin, but the head… distinctly canine. Rounded and blunt like a dog's knot, the flared tip thick as her wrist. A bead of pre-cum glistened at the small slit.

Silas's chest rumbled with a low growl—pleasure, not threat.

"Your turn," he said, his voice gravel over silk.

Mara lifted her arms. His clawed hands were gentle on the buttons of her flannel shirt, each one released with deliberate care. He peeled it away, then her t-shirt underneath, his knuckles brushing her ribs as they went. Her jeans followed—he crouched slightly to pull them down, his head nearly grazing the cabin's low ceiling at that angle.

The cold air hit her skin. The wood stove kept the cabin warm enough, but not quite warm enough for nudity. Her nipples hardened instantly.

"Come here," Silas said.

He stood, pulling her against his chest. Fur pressed into her bare breasts, soft and thick and warmer than she'd expected. His arms wrapped around her—hands easily spanning her waist, claws retracted somehow, gentle.

Mara tilted her head back. He kissed her—his muzzle was blunt but his lips were firm, surprisingly human in how they moved against hers. She tasted him: wild and clean, like pine sap and cold water. His tongue pushed into her mouth and she opened for him, taking it, tasting the slightly canine shape of it.

She moaned into his mouth. His hands slid down to her ass, lifting her easily. Her legs wrapped around his waist without thinking—she was small against him, five-foot-five in bare feet to his seven, light enough that he held her like she weighed nothing.

He carried her three steps to the bed and lowered her onto it. The rough blanket caught against her skin as he followed her down, his weight settling over her body. His cock pressed against her thigh, hard and hot and impossibly thick.

"Tell me what you want," Silas said against her lips.

"You," Mara answered. "Inside me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." No hesitation in it. Just yes.

His hand moved between them, fingers—carefully not using his claws—parting her folds. She was already wet, her body responding to him with eager heat. He growled again as he felt it, a rumbling vibration she could feel against her breasts.

"Good," he said, and guided himself into position.

The head of his cock pressed against her entrance. She felt the rounded, canine-shaped tip spreading her open, wider than any human man had ever done. He was thick—she'd seen it, known intellectually, but feeling it...

"Relax," Silas murmured, watching her face.

She breathed out and he pushed forward.

Her pussy stretched around him, inch after thick inch of hard cock sinking deeper. The flared head reached spots inside her she hadn't known existed, pressing against her cervix with gentle pressure. He was buried in her to the root—she could feel his hips against hers, the fur tickling her inner thighs.

"Fuck," Mara gasped. "You're huge."

Silas stayed still, letting her adjust. His cock twitched inside her, a small movement that made her clench around him reflexively. He groaned at the sensation.

"You're so tight," he said, his voice strained. "So wet."

He started to move—slow, deep strokes that pulled almost all the way out before pushing back in. Each thrust pushed the air from her lungs, made her arch into him. His balls slapped against her ass with each movement, heavy and full.

Mara's hands gripped his shoulders, feeling the fur there, the muscle

beneath it. She scraped her nails—not claws—down his back and he shuddered, his rhythm stuttering.

"Harder," she said. "Please."

His hips snapped forward, driving into her with more force. The bed frame creaked—solid oak, but creaking. The cabin filled with the sound of flesh hitting flesh, wet and rhythmic. His fur brushed against her inner thighs with each thrust, the texture adding another layer of sensation.

He dropped his head to her shoulder, his muzzle buried in the crook of her neck. She felt his hot breath there, heard his low panting as he fucked into her. One hand braced beside her head; the other slid between them to find her clit.

"Come on," Silas rumbled against her throat. "Let me feel you."

His thumb circled her clit while his cock drove into her relentlessly. Mara's thighs shook—she couldn't hold them still, couldn't control the way they trembled around him. Her breasts bounced with each thrust, nipples dragging across the dark fur of his chest.

The orgasm hit like lightning through her spine. Her pussy clamped down on his cock, clenching and releasing in waves as pleasure tore through her body. She screamed—no words, just sound—and Silas's grip on her shoulder tightened.

He followed her over the edge with a sharp bark of his own, his cock pulsing inside her, flooding her with heat. He went deep and stayed there, his hips grinding against hers as he came, filling her completely.

They lay there afterward, tangled in sweat-soaked sheets, breathing hard. Silas's weight was still on top of her, though he'd gone still, his heart beating fast against her chest.

"Fuck," Mara said when she could form words again.

Silas laughed—actual laughter, a deep chuffing sound that vibrated through both of them. He rolled to the side, taking her with him so she ended up sprawled on his chest. His fur was damp where she'd been

pressed against it.

"That was—" he started.

"Yeah," Mara finished.

They stayed like that until the fire in the wood stove died down, the cabin cooling slowly. Silas's cock softened inside her, then slid out as he shifted position. Cum leaked from her pussy onto the sheets—a wet spot, visible even in the dim lantern light.

"Shit," she said. "I'm sorry."

Silas blinked drowsily at her. "For what?"

"We didn't use a condom."

He was quiet for a moment, thinking. "Can't get pregnant while I'm shifted," he said finally. "Biologically can't. Different physiology."

Mara relaxed into that information. "Good to know."

They slept eventually, still tangled together under the blankets. The lantern burned low and died sometime during the night, leaving only embers from the wood stove to glow in the darkness.

Morning came as grey light through the single cabin window. Snow fell outside—steady, cold November snow that had been falling all night.

Silas was already awake when Mara opened her eyes. He sat at the small table by the window, wearing jeans and a flannel shirt—she didn't remember him putting those on. Steam rose from a cup in his clawed hands.

The cabin smelled like coffee and woodsmoke.

Mara sat up in bed, the blanket falling to her waist. She was naked beneath it, her body aching pleasantly in all the right places. Her pussy still felt full, even though he wasn't inside her anymore—sticky with his cum and her own wetness.

"Morning," Silas said. His amber eyes tracked down her body before meeting her gaze again.

"Coffee?" she asked, looking at the pot on the stove.

"Fresh. Hot."

Mara stood, naked, and walked to the stove. Her thighs were sticky—she could feel it, but didn't bother cleaning up first. She poured coffee into a tin cup, added cream from the small refrigerator.

Silas watched her move. His gaze was hungry even in the morning light, even with clothes on now.

"Stay," Mara said suddenly. "Not tonight. The winter. Whatever comes."

His head tilted slightly, ears perking forward. He set his cup down carefully—she could see he was surprised by the request.

"I've waited a long time for someone to ask that," Silas said. His voice was quiet in the morning stillness. "I'll stay."

Scene 6 — The Hunters

The dawn broke grey and cold, the sun a weak glow behind the thick clouds. Mara stepped out onto the porch, the snow crunching under her boots. The air bit at her cheeks, raw and unyielding. She held her grandfather's old shotgun low, its metal cool and familiar, a weight that grounded her.

Behind her, Silas stood tall in his Dogman form, his broad shoulders filling the doorway. His amber eyes watched the road. The silence was absolute, save for the wind through pine needles.

The rumble of an engine echoed up the snow-packed drive, growing louder, closer. A truck appeared, kicking up snow spray and exhaust in the frozen air, a cloud billowing behind it. It stopped at the end of the drive, the engine idling. Two men stepped out, their breath misting in the cold air, their eyes hard and hungry.

Dale Kessler, his face weathered by years of sun and drink, his grey hair hidden under a cap that bore the logo of a long-defunct factory. His son Cody, young and eager, his eyes darting around nervously. They carried rifles, the barrels glinting in the dull light.

A dog, a large, snarling beast with fur as black as the lake on a moonless night, was let out of the truck bed on its leash. It strained against it, its eyes locked onto Silas, teeth bared, a growl rumbling deep in its chest.

Dale raised his rifle, pointing it at Silas. Mara stepped forward, her boots crunching in the snow, her voice steady and clear. "This is my land, my home. The creature under my roof is under my protection. You'll not hunt here."

Dale's eyes narrowed, his grip tightening on his rifle. His knuckles were white. "That's a fuckin' Dogman, girl. A trophy. We're taking it."

Mara shook her head, her eyes steady on Dale's. "The snare you set on my land was illegal. I kept the cut wire. I'll be in Onaway Monday morning with it at the sheriff's office. You're trespassing. If you shoot, you shoot me

first."

Cody hesitated, his eyes flicking between Mara and his father. He lowered his rifle, the barrel dipping towards the snow. Dale cursed, his face reddening. "Damn it, Cody! This is our chance!"

"My grandfather ran you off this land once," Mara said. "Thirty years ago, with this same shotgun. He told me about it. He said you came back every few years, a little older, a little meaner, and a little more empty-handed. He was right."

Dale's mouth worked, but no words came out. The dog kept straining at the leash, its barking ragged now, tired. Cody looked at his boots.

Mara's voice remained steady and calm. "You're on my land, with illegal gear, threatening what's under my roof. You leave now, or you face the consequences."

The dog lunged at Silas, barking and snarling. Silas stood perfectly still, his great furred form unmoving. He could have attacked, could have ended the creature's life with a single blow, but he did not. His hands, human hands with claws, remained loose at his sides.

Cody lowered his rifle fully, his eyes downcast. Dale swore again, spitting into the snow. He grabbed the dog's leash, pulling it towards the truck. "Come on, boy. Looks like we're going home empty-handed."

But Dale did not leave. He stood there, his rifle rising, pointing at Mara now, his eyes filled with anger and grudging respect. The dog strained at the leash, barking and lunging. Cody shifted nervously, his hands twitching near his rifle.

Mara's hand was steady on the shotgun held low, her finger resting alongside the trigger guard. She met Dale's gaze. The world held its breath, the wind through the pines pausing, the lake ice creaking softly.

Silas moved then, his great form shifting, changing fluidly, until he stood beside Mara in his human form. His amber-brown eyes were cold and hard. His hands, scarred and strong, were loose at his sides, ready for whatever

came next.

Dale's eyes flicked to Silas, then back to Mara. He lowered his rifle, the barrel no longer pointed at her heart. He turned, stomping towards the truck, the dog straining against the leash. Cody followed, his shoulders hunched, his rifle slung over his shoulder.

The truck rumbled to life, the engine growling. It reversed down the drive, kicking up snow spray and exhaust in the frozen air. Mara stood watching, her breath misting in the cold air, her shotgun held steady. Silas stood beside her, watching the truck until it disappeared down the road.

Mara turned, looking up at Silas. He stood before her in his human form, his hands scarred and strong. He reached out, cupping her cheeks, his thumbs brushing against her lips.

"You chose the lake," he said, his voice low and rough. "You chose the winter. You chose me."

She nodded, her eyes steady on his. "I chose all of it. The lake, the winter, you. I want to stand beside you, not just hear your story in the woods. I want to live in the open with you, no more hiding in the shadows."

He leaned down, his lips brushing against hers. They stood there, their breaths misting in the air.

As they stepped off the porch, his form changed again, fur darkening along his arms, his stride lengthening, until he walked beside her tall and furred, seven feet of Dogman in the morning light.

Together, they walked down the porch steps, their footprints marking the snow, one set human, one great and clawed, side by side. They walked towards the woodpile, their breaths misting in the cold air, their hearts filled with a warmth that had nothing to do with the season.