

Hour of the Wolf

Brenda couldn't quite believe her eyes when she saw what Claire had found. It was only when Callum, sitting beside her in the driving seat of their old Range Rover, whistled through his teeth that she realised that she wasn't seeing things. The girl really was holding a wolf cub in her arms.

They had received the call earlier that afternoon on what Brenda liked to think of as the Woody End Animal Shelter's 'hotline'. In practice their telephone rarely rang these days, except when it was the electricity company calling to remind them that even charities had bills to pay. Otherwise, it seemed like people only ever thought of her and Callum when they were being bothered by rats, or in the case of the farms that took up a good proportion of the land in this part of Perthshire, foxes. Those calls really annoyed Brenda - they weren't Pest Control.

That's why she was so glad when Claire got in touch. Most of the time at least. The girl was always picking up waifs and strays. This included all manner of creatures, ranging from hedgehogs and rabbits that had come off worse in an encounter with a motor vehicle on the local dual carriageway, to, rather more controversially, domesticated dogs and cats that Claire, bless her, thought were not being shown enough love and affection by their current owners. Unsurprisingly it was cases involving the latter that tended to give Brenda rather more of a headache than they were worth.

Initially Brenda had not been too sure which of the categories Claire's latest call would fall into.

"Please come quick Brenda, I think I've found a wolf." Those had been the girl's breathless words on the phone, swiftly followed by a description of the place that she had found the animal. Her first thought on putting down the receiver was that Claire had discovered yet another 'abandoned' puppy. She had groaned inwardly at the time, fearing that she had to reassure yet another of her neighbours that the teenager was not abducting their pets.

When she took the news to Callum he had quickly, and it soon turned out, correctly concluded that Claire was up in Blair Forest. That was not surprising. The former ranger had spent all his life in the area and knew it, as the cliché went, like the back of his hand. Not for the first time Brenda was glad to have the big man from Pitlochry around. As a Sassenach she would have been lost in this, one of the wildest remaining parts of Scotland, without his ready local knowledge to guide her.

Initially, and much like Brenda, he had taken the news of Claire's find with more than a hint of reservation. He had not said much, he never did, but scepticism had rolled off him in waves. Ach lassie, there's never been *wolves* in these hills, not for a thousand years gone - that was what his look had told Brenda. But all he had said was "Let's go".

The obvious doubt that had earlier been evident made Callum's shock now even more unsettling to Brenda. Callum being anything other than his usual stoic self always made her nervous. Of course it didn't help that she herself was a bundle of nerves because, whether they should have been extinct for a thousand years or not she was sure of one thing. Claire was cradling a wolf cub in her arms.

'Cradle' was the right word to use because Claire was holding the cub the way that she always held animals - with as much care as a mother would hold her baby. Brenda approached them gingerly, anxious not to frighten the young creature away. She

need not have worried. The little animal was perfectly content in Claire's arms and showed no signs of wanting to be anywhere else. Claire beamed at Brenda and she smiled back, unable to help herself.

In all the time she had been at the animal shelter and before that when she had been a park ranger in the Peak District, Brenda had never been in the presence of a really *wild* animal. To find a real, honest-to-goodness wolf on her doorstep was a treat that she had only ever dreamed of. Somehow this made all of the hoax calls and lost sheep that she had had to contend with over the years worthwhile.

"It is, isn't it?" said Claire, "A wolf I mean? I knew it wasn't a fox, because look at the shape of his head - too wide and blocky - and see the colouring?"

Claire went on to list the features that commonly distinguished wolves and foxes but Brenda was barely listening, her regard held instead by the subject of her talk. He - if the cub was in fact male, Brenda hadn't had a chance to get a good look at the bits that counted for the purpose of gender identification - was certainly a handsome little thing. He was already a handful, wriggling and squirming so much that it was all that Claire could do to hold on to him.

"He looks thirsty." Callum said, practical as always.

"Yes, we'd better get him back to the shelter," said Brenda, at the stricken look which crossed Claire's face adding hastily, "You can carry him."

Woody End Animal Shelter was located at the opposite end of the Perthshire Valley across miles of unbroken countryside. Most of the land belonged to wealthy farmers, the descendants of local Lairds from times past, and it had been well-maintained over the centuries. In all that time, the view had hardly changed - large open expanses of fields criss-crossed by low stone walls and dotted with the odd ancestral pile that had housed generations of landowners. Beyond these civilized and well-tilled lands, though, there lurked the wild vastness of the area's protected woodlands. These were some of the oldest virgin forests that remained in Britain, a remnant, it was said in local legends, of the mythical First Wood that had once covered the whole country in the misty dawn of history. The forests had mainly been preserved as the main habitat of a rare species of roe deer, but there were some who whispered that they were the haunt of other, even rarer things - creatures that had otherwise disappeared from the British Isles entirely.

Like wolves? Brenda speculated. She looked at the wolf cub that Claire was now trying to feed with a bottle of milk that they had found in the back of the Range Rover. Was it really possible that animals thought by modern science to have been extinct could still exist, that they had been somehow overlooked because they had fallen through the cracks, living in places too obscure to have been searched properly? If there were still wolves living wild in Britain then what else might remain - bears, mammoths, dragons? Brenda dismissed her train of thought as fanciful in the extreme and concluded quietly that the wolf cub could not possibly be part of a wild pack at all, but was far more likely to belong to a private collection. The local Lairds and their descendants in this part of the country were renowned for their eccentric tastes after all.

Brenda was distracted from her musings when she noticed that Callum was slowing the vehicle down to a stop. Looking ahead she noted with concern that the road ahead appeared to be blocked by a small crowd of men. She recognised the profiles of a couple of local farmers and the men who worked their land, all of them gathered around something in the middle of the road. There was the large, weatherworn frame of Titus

McCrorry, who owned the nearby McCrorry farm and beside him, Brenda noticed with a sinking heart, was the wiry form of ‘wee’ Gordon Cameron, who owned the neighbouring land. Due to previous run-ins over injured animals found on both their lands, Brenda was not on particularly good terms with either man but, whereas McCrorry grudgingly seemed to accept the need for the shelter, Cameron made no secret of his disdain for her and her ‘operation’ as he termed it.

“This looks like something we should check out.” Callum said, parking the Range Rover at the side of the road.

“I’ll deal with it,” said Brenda, giving Claire and the wolf cub a meaningful look as she got out of the vehicle. The last thing that she needed was for the local farmers to think that she was breeding wild wolves at Woody End. Callum nodded to confirm that he would keep an eye on the girl and the animal, who happily both seemed too absorbed in each other to pay much attention to anything else.

As she approached Brenda saw with revulsion that the shape that the men were gathered around was the dead body of a sheep. Its throat had been torn out and its fleece was matted with blood, the red forming a shocking contrast against the whiteness of the wool. When they heard her footsteps several faces turned. None of the expressions that met Brenda was friendly and Farmer Cameron, unsurprisingly, looked openly hostile.

“There’s nothing to see here lassie, you can be on your way.”

“Calm down Gordon,” said another of the men, whom Brenda had not recognised immediately as he was in plain clothes. It was PC Ewan Carter of the Perthshire Constabulary. “Miss Moloney may be able to help us identify what did this,” the policeman added, turning to Brenda hopefully.

“I know what did this – it’s those damn foxes, that’s what!” said Farmer Cameron, before subsiding at a sharp glance from Constable Carter.

Brenda, who was a trained veterinary surgeon, knelt to examine the body of the sheep. In her line of work she could not afford to be squeamish, but nevertheless she almost gagged as she inspected the corpse. Although she had seen plenty of dead and dying animals both in training and practice as a vet, they had been of a smaller variety than this large Highland ewe and besides that, she had never before come across wounds as horrific as these ones. She knew instinctively that no fox or dog had jaws powerful enough to cause the injuries before her. She had only ever seen damage like this inflicted by lions and tigers, and that was on wildlife documentaries, not in the Scottish countryside.

Brenda relayed her thoughts to PC Carter, whom she instinctively latched onto as the most reasonable of the men there. Gordon Cameron continued to rant and rave while Titus McCrorry just stared impassively, not making or inviting any comments. When she was finished the constable scratched his head.

“That’s very helpful Miss Moloney but I have to confess that I’m out of my depth here. The nearest zoo is in Glasgow and I’m not aware of any reports or sightings of escaped big cats in the area.”

“What about private collections?” said Brenda, remembering her earlier speculation about the wolf cub.

“There’s Menzies Mansion over yonder,” said Titus, suddenly breaking his silence, raising a gnarled finger to point over the next ridge. “Sir James keeps some exotic animals, so I’ve heard.”

“That’s very helpful Mr McCrory,” said PC Carter then, noticing that Brenda was about to take her leave, “and you too Miss Moloney.”

Brenda noticed that the constable was near her age and quite handsome when he smiled.

“Call me Brenda,” she said with a returning smile.

When she returned to the Range Rover Callum gave her a questioning look.

“I’ll tell you about it when we get back,” said Brenda, giving Claire a meaningful glance. What she had not said to the policeman and the farmers, what she had only just thought of in fact, was that the wounds on the dead sheep might just as easily have been caused by the bite of a very large wolf.

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The remainder of the drive after that was mercifully uneventful and they arrived back at Woody End just as the late summer sky began to darken into early evening. At Claire’s pleading Brenda had allowed her to come back to the Animal Shelter to settle in the wolf club (christened ‘Sonny’ on the journey) but she was stern in her insistence that the girl had to go straight home afterwards. Brenda left the task of finding Sonny a cage in the back with the other stray animals to Callum while she headed to the front office, where the receptionist, Jill, was in an animated mood.

“There you are!” she said as soon as she saw Brenda. “I wondered where you’d got to – it’s all been going on here while you were out.”

Jill, an overweight woman in her sixties with bleach blonde hair, did not do well with stress and she looked almost unwell at the moment, her face red and her bulky form trembling. Brenda asked her what the excitement was all about.

“It’s only the police, if you can believe it - they’re waiting for you out in reception.”

That was quick, thought Brenda, thinking of the handsome PC Carter as she went to the waiting area out front.

“Oh and there was a telephone message for you from...” Jill started to say as she was leaving but Brenda, her attention elsewhere, did not turn around.

“Leave me a note.”

To her disappointment Brenda found that the policeman waiting for her in reception was not Constable Carter but another man. Other than the fact that he was also in plain clothes there were no similarities between Detective Inspector Allison, as he dourly introduced himself, offering no first name, and Ewan Carter. Everything about the Inspector was neat and well ordered, from his clean shaven face to his tailor-made suit, and he looked out of place in the Woody End reception with its casual air of untidiness. He’s no animal lover either, thought Brenda, although she was unsure why that thought popped into her head.

“How can I help you Inspector?” she said, as brightly as possible. He was an officer of the law, after all, and the Animal Shelter needed all of the friends it could get at the moment.

“I understand that you take in stray animals?”

Full marks on your skills of detection so far, thought Brenda. Given that Woody End was an Animal Shelter and that taking in strays was therefore fairly obviously its

purpose, she was not sure whether the Inspector expected an answer to his opening question. She nodded her head in the affirmative anyway however.

“And have you taken in anything... unusual recently?”

Brenda noticed the slight pause before the word ‘unusual’ and thought immediately of Sonny. She weighed her answer in her mind carefully before replying.

“Not that I can think of. Although it might help if you explained what you meant by ‘unusual’?”