

Lone Wolf

By Tracy Fells

Her boots sunk into the hunter's footprints. The snow was only inches deep, but it was easier to tread in his striated steps. Bob Jackson raised his left hand, the signal to stop, stay silent. His right hand held the rifle; its muzzle elevated as if seeking a gap in the oppressive clouds.

Louisa scanned the valley, searching the white boundary marking the end of the green pines. A brown shape stood scenting the air, a mud stain on pristine white. Jackson had reassured her they were downwind and with adequate cover he could get within a hundred metres of the pack. He'd confiscated her binoculars, warning the lenses would reflect their presence even in the dull, muted light.

'It's a bitch,' said Jackson.

'Is she lactating?'

The broad back turned, glacial eyes peered from beneath the brim of his cap as he drawled, 'Ma'am, do you think I can tell that from here?' He'd not yet called her Louisa, nor even, as she'd first introduced herself, Dr Fitzgerald.

'But you can tell it's a female?'

He scratched at his spiky, silver-grey beard. Two smaller shapes appeared from the trees, and without the caution of adulthood leapt forward into the snow, pouncing on invisible prey.

‘It must be Hera,’ cried Louisa. Only the alpha bitch was nursing and there was no sign of any aunties skulking in the trees. The rest of the wolf pack must have been hunting away from the valley.

‘You’ve named them?’ said Jackson.

‘They’re all numbered for research tracking, but sometimes it’s easier to tag them with a simple name.’

‘Vermin don’t need naming.’

Louisa sucked in a breath of gum numbing air. ‘Can we get closer?’

Jackson motioned his rifle towards the valley trough where the clearing merged into a tangle of bushes. ‘Stick behind me, we should be able to skirt round her left flank, we’ll smell her by then.’ Wiping his nose on his puffer jacket sleeve he added, ‘You’ll keep your side of the bargain?’

‘Yes.’ She closed her eyes as a shiver of pain slid over her belly like the wake of some monstrous sea creature.

‘What’s that?’ The rifle drew an arc as Bob Jackson swung around again.

‘Didn’t catch that, Ma’am?’

Louisa hated this man more than anything in her life, more than the constant disapproval of her father, more than Professor Mason and his clinging dullard of a wife, more than the nagging, ache that pulled on her bladder. ‘Yes, I’ll keep my side of the bargain.’

Jackson spat into the snow. 'Good, I've kept my word and brought you here. You didn't believe the pack roamed this far south, now I've proved it.'

'But we're several miles from your farm. These animals are no threat to your livestock.' Neither Jackson nor any of the other landowners had ever demonstrated proof that the pack was killing calves. No carcasses. No photographs. No proof at all.

'This is my land.' His voice was a low, warning snarl. Louisa imagined his lips curling back to reveal sharp incisors in a threat display. 'And you know a wolf can easily cover that distance.'

She focussed on the ground, stepping over roots that looped across the path. The tightly packed pines held their breath, only the scrunch of boots on loose needles rustled between the trees. Beyond the forest there was little to distinguish sky from snow as grubby daylight slid towards dusk. Louisa leant against a pine, its bark peeling like strips of leather jerky. She rubbed the tugging tremor in the small of her back.

Ahead, Jackson stopped and waited for her to catch up. He offered Louisa a stick of gum. Almost smiling she recognised the brand, spiking a memory of home, but the gum resembled a thin, pale tongue making her nauseous. She turned away.

'If we can make it out to the bushes then I'll get a clear shot,' said Jackson folding the gum into his mouth. 'Still want to come with me?'

'We have a bargain. I'll see it through.' Their progress down the valley had been slow, giving Hera time to move her cubs on.

'How many weeks are you?'

'What do you mean?' Louisa folded her arms, scuffing boots over pine needles to expose bare brown earth.

‘How long ‘til the baby comes?’

‘I’ve got some time to go. It’s about six or seven months along.’

Jackson stopped chewing. ‘You don’t seem too sure of your dates, ma’am?

What do the others think about carrying a pregnant woman on their team?’

The implication was that she couldn’t be in charge. He assumed that Andrew, Dr Langouste, being ten years older than Louisa – and a man - led the team. ‘The rest of my research team don’t need to know my situation.’

‘They don’t know you’re pregnant?’

‘As I said, they don’t need to know.’ With her slim build always hidden under baggy winter clothing there was little opportunity for anyone to guess. Bob Jackson was the first to spot her condition. ‘It doesn’t get in the way of my work and I’ll be returning to the UK in two weeks’ time. After the baby’s born I can continue with the re-introduction programme back here in the spring.’

‘With a baby?’ Jackson grunted.

Louisa shrugged. She hadn’t considered the logistics beyond the birth, but she couldn’t abandon the programme at this stage.

‘Wolves and babies don’t mix, ma’am.’ Jackson retrieved the rifle and stepped back into the snow, heading for the bush cover he’d pointed to earlier. Louisa trudged behind him, cradling a hand under her belly. A flash of pain zipped around her middle as if somebody had tightened a ripcord. In the clearing beyond the bushes the wolf mother rolled in the snow as the cubs pawed and chewed at her for milk. A third cub had joined them. Louisa’s team had tracked the family since birth and the cubs were now almost two months old. Hera had birthed five cubs in total, but two were already dead. The weakest died within a week; the other simply disappeared.

‘How long you been getting them pains?’ asked Jackson.

‘Only today,’ she murmured.

‘Any bleeding?’

She didn’t know this guy. He was a hick, a white trash farmer who’d made a fuss about the programme. Kicked up a stink about losing calves to the new pack and promised to shoot any wolf found on his land. ‘What do you know about babies?’ The cord snapped around her middle making her swear loudly.

‘I’ve brought five babies into this world, delivered each one myself,’ said Jackson. ‘My kids never seemed too keen on waiting for any midwife.’ Jackson glanced up at the sky, grey and heavy with the promise of new snow. His tone cooled, ‘I’d ask you, ma’am, to watch your language. I don’t care to hear a woman cursing.’

Plenty more curses rolled on her tongue, but Louisa straightened and looked out to the clearing. The wolf stood, ears static, snout twitching, testing the breeze for man’s alien stink.

Louisa could windmill her arms and start to holler. One shout and Hera would head for the trees. The cubs would quickly follow their mother and the family would be safe. ‘Do you have that clear shot?’ she asked.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Then what are you waiting for?’

Jackson didn’t look at her. ‘I can take out the bitch with one shot, no problem. But the cubs are too scattered and if she goes down they’ll skit off into the forest. I need them closer to their mother, then I’ve a chance of picking them off in succession.’

‘You promised to show me proof that the pack had come south, crossed the state boundary onto your land.’ Louisa took a gulp of air. ‘You’ve kept your side of the bargain. My part was to let you shoot one wolf and you were to make it swift and humane.’ She kept talking, but she wanted to beat at him, to pull snatch the rifle and slam it across his face. ‘One wolf; that was our bargain.’

Two cubs snatched at their mother’s tail, the smallest cub sat behind its siblings, observing their game. Hera ignored the tugging and continued to stare across the clearing.

‘That littl’un reminds me of my youngest, Scott. He always likes to sit and watch, quiet like.’ Jackson spat past her arm; spittle frothing on the quilted fabric of her jacket. ‘You want me to shoot the mother and leave the cubs. That’s a death sentence. They’re too young to find food – they’ll starve to death. Is that humane?’

‘One wolf,’ said Louisa, ‘that was our agreement.’

‘Are those pains getting worse, ma’am?’ Louisa didn’t answer. ‘Are you feeling damp?’

‘What sort of question is that?’

‘You know, down there.’ Jackson rubbed at his crotch.

Louisa stumbled in the snow. Jackson slung the rifle across his back and held out a hand to steady her. ‘Get away from me you filthy pervert!’ She slapped his hand away.

‘Have your waters broken?’

The wolf began to make high-pitched yelps, twisting round she snapped at the two cubs still playing on her tail. The lone cub bounced across the snow in answer to its mother’s calling barks.

‘I’ve got weeks to go, it’s far too early for the baby.’

‘In my experience babies don’t tend to follow a schedule. But if your waters haven’t broken and your not bleeding or nothing, then the contractions are probably fake labour pains. Braxton Hicks, they call them.’ Jackson bowed his head. ‘I’ll offer you a new deal. You let me drive you to the hospital, where they can check you over, and if they say you’re fit to fly then you can get a ticket home.’

‘And in return, what’s your side of the deal?’

Jackson swung the rifle round, unlatched the safety catch and pointed it straight up. The sharp clap sliced through the dozing air, followed by two more shots. Beyond the bushes the wolf and her cubs exploded like brown bullets into the cover of the forest. ‘Your wolf goes free,’ he said.

‘For today,’ Louisa mumbled.

Yellow teeth grinned. ‘For today, ma’am.’

The pain was constant by the time Jackson’s truck pulled into the parking lot of the county hospital. He fetched a wheelchair so she wouldn’t have to walk. Louisa let him fuss and fumble, because every minute he stayed with her gave Hera time to lead her cubs back to the pack. In her head Louisa visualised the wolf pack heading north, crossing the state line to the relative protection of legislated sanctuary.

Gowned and lying on the bed in the antenatal room Louisa stared out to where the sky merged with the hilltops. Jackson towered like a mountain in the small room, awkwardly shifting his bulk from one foot to another. She concentrated on her long pale fingers wishing he would leave. After several minutes she looked up to find Jackson had gone without saying goodbye.

A sliver of moon pushed through the snow bulging clouds, but the end of the day was sharply extinguished as a nurse snapped down the blind. Two women, one in lilac scrubs the other in pink, flitted round Louisa like pastel moths. They said their names, which Louisa instantly forgot. The older woman lifted up Louisa's gown, saying, 'I'm just going to fix these belts around your tummy so we can listen to baby's heartbeat'.

Louisa understood from the nurse's tone that this wasn't a point for discussion. She was in their world now.

The nurse in lilac scrubs looked younger than Louisa, her features and slim build hinted at Chinese descent yet her accent was Canadian. Her small hands swept over Louisa's exposed stomach. 'Your baby is small,' she stated and then stood back to let her colleague fix on the foetal monitors. 'Did you know this?'

Louisa couldn't think of an answer. Pink scrubs laughed, 'Well she's no Amazon. Not likely to produce a ten pounder.'

'Do you want us to call the father?' The tiny lilac lady mimed tapping on an invisible phone as if Louisa were incapable of understanding a simple question.

Father neither partner nor husband. Presumably they had spotted the absence of gold on her finger. 'No.' Her voice sounded loud. 'Thank you.' Professor Mason wouldn't appreciate being woken in the middle of night, certainly not to hear from his ex-student. He wouldn't care to hear from her at all.

Pink scrubs turned away from Louisa to fiddle with the machine on the trolley. 'Anyone else you want us to call?'

Louisa shook her head, but realised both women were no longer looking at her. 'There's nobody that needs to know I'm here.' As the two women exchanged a silent look Louisa asked, 'Is Bob Jackson an honourable man?'

The older nurse straightened. 'Bob Jackson?'

'Do you know him?'

'Sure, honey, everybody in the county knows Bob Jackson.'

Louisa tried to push herself into a sitting position on the bed, but both women slid her back down again. 'He said he delivered five babies. Is that true?'

Lilac scrubs folded her arms. 'He's a good father, looked after all them youngsters and kept the farm going all these years.'

'Babies have a habit of coming with the snow and Bob brought all his children into the world without any doctors.' Pink lady poked a stray wisp of blonde hair behind her ear. 'The youngest was a difficult birth.'

'Scott?' said Louisa remembering the wolf cub.

'Yeah, Scott is Bob's youngest.' The nurse straightened the upper belt across Louisa's pale belly.

After a minute of the two women whispering together Louisa asked, 'What happened to Bob's wife?'

Pink scrubs answered, but kept her back to Louisa, 'Eileen suffered a haemorrhage after the birth.'

Despite the well-heated room Louisa felt the air freeze in her throat as if she were back in the valley. 'She died?'

'Louisa, when did you last feel baby move?' said Pink.

She stared up at the white ceiling. 'I'm not sure. I can't remember.'

‘Have you felt baby move today?’

The evening before Louisa had packed up early for once, taken a hot bath. She thought of the contours of her belly rippling above the waterline, as the lump turned and dived like a submerged monster teasing onlookers with a hint of its mystical shape. ‘Definitely last night, but I can’t remember it moving today. That can’t be right though, I’ve just not noticed...’ Lilac scrubs handed her a cup of water. ‘Is he a man of his word? Can I trust him to keep a promise?’

Lilac and Pink glanced at each other. The older woman’s voice was calm as she placed a cool palm on Louisa’s forehead. ‘When did the pains first start, Louisa?’

‘I was following Jackson. He was charging ahead through the snow.’

‘You were out with Bob Jackson?’ said Lilac.

‘He was showing me he could track a wolf, wanted to prove the pack had come this far south.’ Louisa’s eyes shone. ‘And he did. He kept that part of the deal.’

Pink’s lips curved into a smile, but her stare remained cold. ‘Well, if you’ve been out all day in these temperatures that explains why baby’s heart rate is depressed.’

The two nurses went into a huddle. Louisa closed her eyes, listening for Hera’s howl calling the pack home.

‘We need to sort a few things for you and baby. We’ll be back real soon with a doctor,’ said Lilac.

When the door clicked shut she unstrapped the belts of the monitors and swung off the bed. Plucking her clothes from the chair Louisa padded to the corridor planning to change in the restrooms. Her legs wobbled like a newborn calf tottering to

stand. Falling against the corridor wall Louisa gasped as the ripcord stretched to breaking point.

Ahead was a pair of boots, wet and edged with snow. Jackson cradled the sagging, limp body of a wolf cub, its neck fur congealed with blood. Like Professor Mason he'd lied, broken his word. Bob Jackson had gone after the wolf. Mason was never leaving his wife. With no pack to support her, no sisters or aunties to share the burden, Louisa was truly alone.

'I got you this.' He held out the carcass. 'For the baby.' The bloody gash around the cub's throat was a red satin ribbon and the cuddly wolf toy wore a T-shirt, printed with silver letters: It's a cub!

A puddle spread between her bare feet. Louisa reached out to prop herself upright, gripping Jackson's arm. The smell of the toy's fur, the piercing tang of newness, making her retch.

Ends