

It's on the prowl and it's no pussycat



Big Cat

Jack Churchill

**A panther on a killing spree roams rural England
But who is the hunter and who is the hunted?**

Big Cat
By
Jack Churchill

The Aeolian Press



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THE UPWARD SWING OF THE CROWBAR in Lynton Creswell's hand came to an abrupt stop. His face contorted in disbelief. 'You're doing what?' he said in a voice thick with rage.

The watching crowd fell silent. In the hush, all that could be heard were the whines of the crippled bull terrier. In Creswell's world, a losing dog was a dead dog, and he only owned winners.

Her heart pounding, Rosie fought to keep her voice composed. 'I said; Rosie Flinn, dog warden, and you're under arrest. This... you...' She gulped down a breath. 'This dogfight contravenes the Animal Welfare Act, 2006 and—'

Creswell twisted his bulk to face her. Rosie retreated a step. His bulging stomach might not be intimidating, but the broad span of his shoulders and corded muscles in his neck were.

'—and the Dangerous Dog Act, 1991.' There was now a tremor of uncertainty in her voice.

Outrage had driven Rosie to this remote barn, to steal up to it, and attempt to save the life of the wounded bitch. Fear quickened her heart. It thudded hard and fast as the realisation struck that her rash intervention had created a confrontation it was unwise to be part of, especially for a mother of two with no backup and no coherent plan of what to do next.

Lynton glanced right and left at his brothers, Pat and Terry. Neither possessed his hulking body mass but Rosie suspected their combined IQ was even lower than their big brother's. In the harsh shadows cast by the barn's single overhead lamp, the three men looked like Neanderthal throwbacks.

Piggy eyes stared at Rosie as they tried to comprehend this bewildering turn of events.

‘She a copper?’ said Terry.

He clutched the collar of the winning dog. Eager to finish off its opponent, the snarling pit-bull lunged at the wounded terrier. He yanked it back, but Rosie noticed his fingers, smeared with dog blood, struggled to keep their grip on the collar’s slippery leather.

‘Don't recognise her; she ain't local,’ said Pat. ‘Here, are you a copper? You got to tell us if you are. It’s the law.’

Rosie’s children, Lizzie and Peter, went to the same primary school as Lynton Creswell’s son, Shad. At bedtime two hours earlier, Lizzie blurted out what Shad had boasted about in the playground earlier that day. His Dad and uncles were going to kill some dogs tonight. The news had stoked Rosie’s fury to its highest heat. The brothers were not exactly criminal masterminds and it had not taken a major feat of detective work for her to discover the fight’s location. On hearing the terrier’s agonised yelps, she had charged into the barn.

‘I’m a dog warden,’ repeated Rosie. ‘What you are doing is illegal, and I will certainly call the police.’ She felt in her coat pockets for her mobile phone. Oh damn, where was it?

‘She ain’t The Filth,’ said Terry, ‘just a council noseyparker. She can’t arrest us.’

Smack. The thick metal of the crowbar slapped into Lynton’s open hand. Smack. The metal struck his palm again. Smack. Metal to palm.

Rosie trembled. She did not need psychic powers to read Lynton’s mind. The dimmest light bulb outshone his mental capacity, but that did not give her any kind of advantage. Persuasion and the fear of consequence were concepts alien to impulse driven creatures like the Creswells. Rosie became acutely aware of the thick odours of blood, of dog excrement, of fear, in the barn, and of a new scent, excitement. The mob drew closer to her. This is not, she told herself, a good time to discover you aren’t much of a hero. A hero would face these morons down. A hero would, um, be better prepared. A hero might even call the police first.

One man, curly-haired and fresh-faced, stepped forward.

‘Get lost. Right now,’ he said.

Oh no, not him too? An irrational sense of betrayal made Rosie’s heart pound even faster. Seconds earlier, watching from her hiding place, she had been convinced he was about to step in to stop the killing. Before a word escaped his open mouth, that certainty triggered her into action. Better that she should intervene in her official capacity than some member of the public, she thought. A large part of her decision was also because he looked like an adult version of her six year-old son, Peter. The aggression he now directed at her only deepened her dismay.

‘You’ve no business here,’ said his mate, a nasty-looking character in biker’s leathers.

'Why don'tcha go and fine someone 'cos their dog crapped on the pavement?' said a woman whose ample figure was improbably crowded into tight Lycra top and leggings. 'Go on, piss off.'

She gave Rosie a shove, forcing the dog warden backwards and towards the open barn doors. Her two burly escorts chortled. Somehow, their mockery felt more threatening than the storm of four-letter abuse Rosie had been expecting. Dogfighting fans were not renowned for their mastery of the social graces.

But Rosie was nothing if not stubborn. The more she felt threatened, the more mulish she became.

'Give me that dog immediately,' she said indicating the wounded bull terrier. 'She needs urgent treatment. I'm not leaving without her.'

'Don't think so,' Lynton said. 'That dog's dead, only it don't know it yet.' He took a step towards her. 'Thing is, what do we do with you?'

Terry swung his pit bull around to face her. The powerful animal's white teeth, exposed in rictus snarl, gleamed in the bright light. Rosie eyed with alarm the tenuous grip of his fingers on the dog.

'How about dog versus dog warden?' Terry said.

'Always wanted to watch someone up against a fighting dog like Tyson,' said Pat.

Rosie couldn't help herself. She knew she'd make things worse but she had to say it anyway. 'Tyson? How original. What a stupid name. Which one of you morons came up with that?'

This caused a temporary halt in the brothers' advance. They looked at each other as if to decide who would assume responsibility and, therefore, take the most offence. Trouble was, they really could not recall who had picked the dog's name.

'Don't matter,' Lynton said after several seconds passed. 'Got a question for you, dog warden. You gonna be dog meat or dog...?' His voice trailed away as he failed to come up with a witty quip.

Rosie noticed both Curly Hair and Lycra Top talking into mobile phones. Oh, great, she thought, now there's going to be live commentary of me being mauled by a pit bull. It occurred to her, finally, that the prudent thing to do might be to get out of the barn and to do so quickly. She spun around, but Pat was faster off the mark. In three long strides, he placed himself between Rosie and the open door. She attempted to feint right and step left, but he read the move with ease and he pinned her tight against his chest with an arm around her neck. Many in the watching crowd whooped and applauded.

'Where do you want her, big bruv?' Pat said between grunts as Rosie wriggled in his grip.

'You stink,' she said. He had the rank, queasy reek of a 'Big Mac with fries' addict.

'Oh, enough of this farce. Amateur hour is over,' said a commanding woman's voice. 'Steve, do you want to do your thing?'

Pat and Rosie stopped their wrestling. They both stared in shock at Lycra Top. She no longer sounded like the bored airhead who had spoken moments earlier.

‘Suppose I’d better,’ said Curly Hair. He held high an ID card. ‘Inspector Steve Ashworth, RSPCA. And this time you actually are under arrest. All of you.’

‘Yeah, yeah. You don’t have the right to arrest us, no more than this girlie. You ain’t the police,’ Lynton Creswell said with a sneer.

‘No, that would be me,’ said Lycra Top, ‘and I’m with him.’

One of her escorts said, ‘Now, now, now!’ into his phone.

The glare of approaching headlights and flicker of blue flashing lights bounced off the barn doors as three police vans and a dog unit sped down the farm track.

Lynton, as ever, reacted without thought.

‘Take ‘em down, lads,’ he said.

Crowbar raised once more, he charged at Lycra Top.

Rosie never managed to work out how the woman accomplished the impressive feat of concealing an extendable police baton in her skin-tight clothing, but she had. Its metal shaft snickered as she flicked it to full length. In two sharp, efficient blows, the crowbar was out of Lynton’s grasp and he was down on his knees grunting in pain whilst holding a broken wrist. Both of Lycra Top’s companions produced similar weapons. One of them pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

It was then that Terry Creswell released Tyson.



Five minutes later, Steve Ashworth reached high and held out a hand to Rosie.

‘Here, let me help you down.’

Rosie had no notion of how she accomplished her panic-driven scramble up into the rafters, and was just as certain she had no idea how to climb back down again.

‘I think I’ll get you a ladder,’ Ashworth said.

As Rosie descended, she surveyed the carnage. Lynton Creswell’s unbroken wrist was cuffed to the axle of an aged tractor. Terry Creswell was being treated by one of the police detectives for a nasty bite on his forearm. Lycra Top and the second detective were using a police medical kit to attempt to staunch the numerous dog bites inflicted on Pat Creswell. The sizeable chunk torn from his left buttock presented a troublesome challenge. They had no dressing big enough to cover the wound. The pit bull, its bloodlust already high and driven into frenzied aggression by the large number of targets presented to it, had run amok. It first savaged Terry, then half a dozen of the onlookers until, finding Pat’s meaty odour irresistible, it latched onto him.

Tyson, now muzzled and penned in one corner of the barn, was trapped after Ashworth’s biker friend, also a RSPCA undercover officer, pulled a net from a concealed jacket pocket. Flung over the dog, it gave them traction as he, Ashworth, the three detectives, plus two uniformed officers, tried to

wrench the attack dog from its grip on Pat's rear end. Flesh gave way before dog jaw. The pit bull was torn free with a good pound of hamburger-flavoured buttock held tight in his locked teeth.

Rosie's feet touched the barn floor.

'Thank you,' she said to Ashworth.

The uniformed officers had bundled the dogfighting fans outside and into two of the police vans. Exposed to the night air, the building felt cold. The only sounds were Pat Creswell's keening wails and the whimpers of the semi-conscious wounded bitch. The leather-clad RSPCA man stroked the dog's head as he assessed her wounds.

'Steve, she's got at least two broken legs, has God only knows how many lacerations, and she's lost a huge amount of blood,' he said. He peeled off his jacket and carefully wrapped her in it. 'I'd better get her to the surgeon right now.' With tender care, he lifted the dog. 'Suze, can I take one of your vans and a driver? We need to travel blues and twos.'

Lycra Top looked up. 'Feel free; just ask one of the lads outside. Any argument, send him to me.'

'You get going, Neil,' said Ashworth. 'I'll phone ahead.' He walked outside to make the call.

The dog warden was left to contemplate her actions. Rosie's anger had long subsided, as had the adrenaline surge from the struggle with Pat Creswell. It was replaced by a dull realisation of the likely outcome of the mad, passionate fury that had overwhelmed her. She shivered. She felt as if someone had chucked a bucket of icy water over her.

'You cold?' said Ashworth from the doorway. 'Can I get you a coat?'

Rosie shook her head.

An ambulance for Pat Creswell arrived. They watched as he was loaded face down onto a stretcher, his bloody buttocks exposed to the air.

Balanced on her high heels, Lycra Top crouched to search the straw-covered barn floor with her hands.

'Ha, got it,' she said in triumph. She held aloft the missing chunk of flesh. 'He can be at one with his bum again.' As she dropped the bloody gobbet into a clear plastic evidence bag then gave it to the paramedics, she glanced over at Ashworth and Rosie. 'Steve, you need to have words with her. Better all-round than if I do it.' She turned away.

'Impressive isn't she?' Ashworth said in a discreet tone.

'Who is she?' said Rosie, equally quietly. 'I wouldn't want to cross her.'

'Her name is Detective Sergeant Susie Derrington and, yes, she is quite a handful.'

There was something odd, unexpected, in the way Ashworth said it. Rosie looked at him. He smiled and held up his left hand. A gold wedding band glinted.

'Yep, she's my missus,' he said. 'Won't let me go undercover without her being in attendance. Very useful she is too.'

Oh well, thought Rosie, another one that got away.

‘You should get home,’ Ashworth said. ‘Let me walk you to your car. We’ll be in touch to arrange a time and date to take your statement.’

The sky was clear, but only a few stars could be seen through the combined orange glow cast by suburban London twenty miles to the north and Croydon away to the east.

Ashworth inhaled the chilly air. ‘Snow’s on its way,’ he said.

‘How can you tell?’ said Rosie.

‘Not a country girl are you?’

‘Strictly a Londoner until I moved here a couple of years ago.’

‘You can smell the snow on the air. Must be something to do with humidity, I suppose. You can sense it coming once you’ve worked outdoors long enough.’ Ashworth paused. ‘Listen, Suze is right. When I said earlier, keep your nose out, I meant it. If we hadn’t been there, well, I’d rather not think about what they could have done to you.’

Rosie tugged with her fingernails at a splinter in the palm of her left hand. She’d picked it up when taking refuge on the rafter. Pinpricks of pain in her inner thighs made her certain she’d got a couple more lodged in her flesh. Not that she was going to inspect the damage until she got to the privacy of a bathroom with a lock on the door.

‘You just can’t barge in like that,’ Ashworth said. ‘I, we, the RSPCA, have a Royal Charter, and the police always back us up. They have to; it’s their job and it’s my job, but you, you’re just a...’ He endeavoured but failed to come up with a polite turn of phrase.

‘Just a dog warden?’ said Rosie.

The edge in her voice made him hold up the palms of both hands as he tried to placate her.

‘What you did was great. Incredibly brave. Admirable. But Suze and her lads would have arrested them anyway.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

The splinter came free. Rosie winced at the searing stab of pain. She sucked the wound.

‘No you didn’t,’ Ashworth said, ‘and you could have screwed up months of undercover work.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Rosie said with genuine contrition.

They reached her car, an ageing blue Daewoo saloon, part of the flotsam left to Rosie after the wreck of her marriage. Dreading a long lecture, she opened the driver’s door and climbed inside. Ashworth crouched to speak to her at eye level.

‘Next time you hear of something like this, call us first.’

‘Sure.’ Rosie hesitated then asked the question uppermost in her mind. ‘Are you going to report me for this?’

Ashworth smiled again. ‘Me? No. Neil won’t either. No way. But Suze, well, I just don’t know.’ He took a deep breath and sighed. ‘She has strong views about interfering busybodies who get in the way of police officers performing their duties.’

‘Oh God, I knew it.’ This was something senior management at her employer, Mid-Surrey County Council, would not take lightly.

‘Hey, don’t worry.’ Ashworth grinned at her. ‘I didn’t say she would do anything. Mid-Surrey Police got a good bust here tonight, a great one, in fact. Lots of arrests; dog rescues; there’ll be loads of positive publicity and, better still, Suze got to beat up one of the Creswells. That’s a career highlight in itself. She’ll be okay. Just don’t do it again. Suze gives no-one a second chance, not even me.’

‘Okay, sorry.’

‘One final thing. How did you hear about tonight’s dogfight? What brought you here all fired up?’

When Rosie finished her tale, Ashworth mulled over what he’d heard. His fingers drummed on the car doorframe. It was several seconds before he spoke again.

‘Tell me, have you considered what will happen once the Creswell brothers are bailed?’ he said.

‘You mean they won’t be in prison?’

‘Eventually, yes. Definitely. But, until they go to trial, they’ll be on bail. Probably out by tomorrow morning. And you live locally, don’t you?’

‘What if they find out my address?’ The awful realisation of the danger she’d placed Lizzie and Peter in made Rosie feel sick. Regret piled upon regret.

Ashworth’s fingers continued their drum tattoo. Finally, he said, ‘If you like, I’ll have a word with Suze. She’ll let the Creswells know they’re not to go near you. Suze will hate you for life, but, when she leans on someone, even morons like the Creswells pay attention.’

It was a bargain Rosie was more than willing to strike.

‘Yes, please,’ she said, at the same time certain she and the kids would move back to her Mum’s. For a while. Purely temporary. Maybe for a month. Or two. Or three.

‘Deal,’ said Ashworth. He looked up at the sky again and breathed deep. ‘Definitely snow on the way.’



Torch beams flashed in erratic directions as the four drunk men lurched along the path. Each blamed the others for not keeping the torchlight true to their course. They slipped, stumbled, and barged one another as much from inebriation as from unseen roots and snagging branches. Second in line, Oakshott tripped and grabbed the back of Zaharkin’s hunting jacket.

‘Careful, *booy morzhovy*, you bloody idiot,’ said the Russian. ‘Have you never been in a wood at night before?’

The Englishman’s reply betrayed the amount of alcohol he had consumed. ‘Sorry, so sorry Alexei. Just not used to it. I mean, how can you drink so much vodka and live? That stuff’s way too strong for the likes of me.’

This was not the impression his two partners wanted to make on their billionaire host.

‘Don’t be so pathetic, Oakers. If Zaharkin thinks we’re weak, he won’t do business with us,’ Beacon said, his voice pitched low to prevent the exiled oligarch overhearing them.

Jervis joined in. ‘You’re an embarrassment, you idiot,’ he said. ‘Breathe deep, clear your head and, for God’s sake, get a grip on yourself.’ He raised his voice. ‘I think milk might be too strong for him, eh, Alexei?’

Zaharkin made no reply. Muttering Russian oaths under his breath, he lumbered on.

Oakshott slipped once more and stumbled to his knees. His torchlight cut a wild trajectory through the tangled undergrowth. Unseen by the men, the beam of light touched upon black fur in the blackness. Smooth muscles hunched. The movement became a dark shiver in the night: a shudder in the dark. In an instant, it was gone.

Ten weary minutes later, the foursome came to an irregular halt outside an age-worn shack propped against a stand of birch trees. Zaharkin’s torchlight highlighted his lined face. His breath steamed in the cold night air. Beneath dark eyebrows, his eyes twinkled but could not hide the hardness within.

‘And here, my friends, is our home for the night,’ he said. ‘My little hunting *dacha*.’ Zaharkin’s arms swept expansively wide to encompass the lean-to.

Jervis poked a bony finger at its brittle, warped shingles.

‘This it?’ he said. ‘It’s a bit of a dump, Alexei.’

The sneer, delivered in an educated Home Counties accent, was achieved effortlessly, but had no effect on the amiable Russian.

‘*Da*, of course. What else, for sure?’

‘Well, for starters, maybe a bit more luxury?’

‘For God’s sake, Zaharkin, we’re only three miles from your mansion,’ said Beacon. ‘Why didn’t we stay there?’

‘In the warmth,’ said Oakshott. ‘With servants.’

‘I promise you hunting Russian-style and so we are here,’ said the billionaire. He swayed drunkenly then pushed with his tubby frame against the damp, resistant timber of the door and forced it open. He gestured to the three Brits. ‘Enter, my friends. Come in, come in, *tovarisch*’

Zaharkin lit an oil lamp. Its light flared to reveal two pairs of rough-hewn bunks, a battered table, four dilapidated chairs, and a decrepit samovar perched on a wood-burning stove. Whilst their host bustled about, his guests spoke quietly amongst themselves.

‘Not quite what you’d expect of a billionaire’s hunting lodge,’ said Jervis. He kicked the frail wall.

‘Matches the man, in my opinion,’ said Beacon.

Now indoors and safe from the wild and dark woods, Oakshott recovered his poise.

‘Hardly riding to the hounds is it?’ he said as he unrolled the coarse blanket Zaharkin provided as bedding. ‘Oh my God, look at this.’

Wedge between bunk frame and mattress was the mummified corpse of a songbird. He picked it up by one wing. Tiny grey feathers drifted to the floor.

'Quick, get rid of it before Alexei sees it,' said Beacon. 'He'll probably shoot it and claim it was an eagle.'

'Or shove it in a bottle of vodka because he thinks it'll improve the flavour,' said Jervis.

Oakshott opened the door then tossed the bird outside. Wary of offending the oligarch, the three friends smothered their laughter.

Zaharkin regarded the three property developers with a baleful eye. In contrast to his weatherworn camouflage clothing and well-used knife, rifle and binoculars, they cut superficially impressive figures. But their tweed hunting outfits had not yet shed the creases left by their outfitter's packaging. New polished leather straps and belts creaked and squeaked from lack of use and their sheathed rifles showed no sign of acquaintance with mud or grass.

He pulled an unlabelled bottle from behind a pile of firewood. It contained a clear, russet-brown liquid. He sighed. Time again to play jovial host to these three idiots.

'Aha, here it is, my boys,' he boomed. 'This will warm you quicker than any fire.'

He scooped four dirty tumblers from a dusty shelf.

Appalled at the sight of yet more vodka, the three Brits gave a collective shudder.

'I mean, is this worth it?' said Oakshott in a whisper.

'It is if we want Zaharkin's cash for Swanmere Phase Two,' said Beacon.

'Bloody bankers. They're the only reason we're here. They've screwed up everything,' Oakshott said.

'Beacon's right,' Jervis muttered in reply. 'This is business. Treat it as such. We need his money, nothing more, nothing less. Don't bugger up this deal. And stop whining.'

Zaharkin scrutinised the interior of one glass. He spat into it then wiped it with a greasy cloth. It was already clean but his guests weren't to know that. He just wanted to enjoy the looks of revulsion on their faces.

'Come, come,' he said as he filled the tumblers to the brim. 'Drink up, Mist'ers Jervis, Oakshott, and Beacon. This vodka, we call it *Okhotnichya*. Hunter's vodka. Appropriate, *da*, yes?'

They smiled at the billionaire. Each took a glass.

'We drink before we hunt,' said Zaharkin. '*Nu budem!* Cheers!'

He knocked back the liquor. His guests attempted the same. Jervis's eyes bulged and his face turned red. Beacon choked but kept his down. Oakshott failed. Coughing uncontrollably, he spewed vodka down his shirtfront.

'Herbs, Jervis, bloody herbs,' he said. 'It's herbal vodka!'

Zaharkin laughed. '*Da*, sure. The best. Made from forest plants. Now drink, Mr. Oakshott. Drink for your health. For the luck of the hunt.'

He refilled Oakshott's glass. His victim looked imploringly at his friends. They glared back at him. Still grumbling, Oakshott lifted the tumbler.

'I mean, herbal vodka?' he said.

Zaharkin raised his own glass in salute.

'Drink, my friend. *Nazdoroye!* We have until dawn. And this does not have dead sparrow in it, yes?'

Beacon groaned inwardly. Zaharkin had heard their bitching. Swanmere Phase Two was surely in peril. The same thought occurred to Oakshott. He knew he had to do his duty. Mentally cursing all things Russian, he swigged down the vodka and held out his glass for a refill.

'Ho, I will make Russian of you yet,' Zaharkin said as he poured.



In the wan pre-dawn light, Oakshott watched snowflakes accumulate on the heads of a clump of daffodils. Despite the arrival of spring, the easterly wind had delivered one last snowfall. The four hunters crouched in a hollow sheltered by a dense thicket of holly bushes. Zaharkin's reluctant companions were pale-faced and hung-over. He was the only one who relished the coming morning.

'Snow? In Surrey? The bastard brought it with him from Siberia,' said Oakshott.

Zaharkin gazed with delight upon the dense treescape now transformed from drear English grey to Siberian white. 'Hah, is true. Mother Russia has come to visit your soft England.'

Oakshott, suffering both from less than an hour's sleep and a stupendous headache, slumped backwards into a snowdrift, then laid his rifle on the ground and leant against Jervis. His uptight friend stiffened and attempted without success to push Oakshott away.

The snowfall ceased. The Russian scanned the steep wooded slopes around them and nodded with satisfaction. He had brought them to the edge of an open glade through which a clear stream gurgled its way down the valley. Zaharkin knew that at least three deer paths intersected in this clearing; he had made many kills here, most of them clean single shots.

For once, his loud voice was hushed.

'Boys, the news is good,' he said. 'Snow is in our favour. Most times, the deer is hard to see. Too many trees are here, there, everywhere,' he gestured at the valley walls, 'but, against snow, deer is easy to shoot. Now dawn has come, it makes for fine shot, you will see.'

Oakshott leant forward and dry-retched between his knees.

Zaharkin grimaced with contempt then turned to resume his careful examination of the terrain.

Beacon glanced nervously at the oligarch's broad back. He spoke to Oakshott in a whisper, 'Oakers, if you're going to be sick again, do it some place where Alexei won't see. Pull yourself together.'

'It's alright for you bloody Scots.' Oakshott scooped up a handful of snow and rubbed it on his face. 'You're used to hard liquor and the freezing cold.' He was more than a little annoyed at the near constant nagging by his two

partners. It wasn't his fault Zaharkin had made it his personal goal to destroy Oakshott's liver by alcohol poisoning. This was no fun. No fun at all.

Nor was Jervis enjoying himself. The cold wind pinched his features tighter. He succeeded finally in shoving Oakshott upright and away.

'Alexei, are you sure this is legal?' he said. 'I mean, don't we need a licence for hunting? A permit?'

Zaharkin did not bother to turn to face him. 'Who cares about permits? Is my land, yes? When I buy it, I buy deer too. Is my right to hunt my deer. What is problem with this?'

Oakshott stared with loathing at their host. He leant forward to whisper to Beacon, 'The problem is we're reduced to begging from a Russian peasant. And he ruddy well poisoned me with that damn home-made vodka.'

Zaharkin sniffed the wind then gestured the others to be silent. 'Something out there. I can smell it.' He frowned. 'Is odd. Not deer. Not like in Russia.'

Beacon and Jervis looked at each other.

The former mouthed silently the word, 'Smell?'

Jervis nodded and rolled his eyes.

'It's not like Russia because this isn't bloody Russia,' muttered Oakshott. 'This is England.'

Jervis agreed with those sentiments, but would be damned if he'd show it. Not when they were on the brink of securing Zaharkin's millions. 'For once in your life will you shut up?' he said to Oakshott.

Zaharkin loaded his rifle. The snick of the bolt as it slid home startled the threesome out of their bickering.

'Movement. Over there,' said the Russian. He jerked his chin in the direction of the far side of the clearing. Beacon and Jervis joined him to peer over the lip of the hollow.

'What is it, Alexei?' said Beacon.

'There. Is deer. Young buck.'

Seventy paces away, a roe deer stag grazed. Caught in the first rays of the rising sun, its russet brown coat was crusted by a layer of melting snow. Jervis was unimpressed by the creature. He had expected something larger, something more moose-like, not this delicate thing. He shivered. The snow might have ceased, but the cold continued to work its way into his bones.

'Shoot it then we can go home,' he said. 'Please.'

The buck lifted its head erect to scent the wind. It held the exact same pose as Zaharkin a minute ago. It too smelt something unusual, a smell it did not recognise.

'Is not us,' Zaharkin said. 'We are down the wind, it cannot smell us.'

The stag sniffed the air. Its long delicate ears twitched then its flanks tensed as it held itself ready for flight. Zaharkin raises his rifle. He knew the spooked animal might flee at any moment. Now was the time to shoot. He aimed then paused.

'Strange.'

'What?' said Beacon.

‘Nothing. I hear nothing, listen.’

Beacon studied the snow-smothered woods. They were silent. Even the gentle shifting of branches by the wind had ceased. Not a bird fluttered or called out. The stag’s flanks trembled as the sun slid behind a cloud. Zaharkin shrugged then re-adjusted his aim. Even without sunlight the optics of his telescopic sight showed the creature clearly. He snuggled the rifle butt tight against his shoulder. His finger tightened on the trigger. With no wind and a downhill shot, he could not miss.

Uninterested by the hunt, lost in his misery, Oakshott had his back turned to the trio. He too sniffed the air.

‘Smells like someone’s pissed himself,’ he said in a mutter, then looked down to make sure it wasn’t him. It wasn’t. Another wave of nausea swept over him, his head pounded, and, in the hope it would all go away, Oakshott closed his eyes. He shifted his weight so that he could find a more restful position between tree root and snow, but no sooner had he begun to relax than the sudden crack of Zaharkin’s shot made him jerk upright.

‘Jesus!’ he said then retched once more.

With a whoop of delight, the Russian lumbered towards his kill. Caught up in the excitement, Jervis and Beacon followed him. With his tormentors gone, Oakshott settled deeper into the soft embrace of the snow. Protected from the cold by the insulation of his thick, waxed jacket, he persuaded himself this was nearly as comfortable as his own bed back in his mansion. Now was his chance to steal a quick nap.

But the strange stench lingered. If anything, it was stronger. Pushing with his elbows against the snow, Oakshott levered himself upright. With the sun gone, the trees fringing the hollow loomed dark above him. Oakshott was a suburbanite. This, the wild, was alien to him. Disorientated by lack of sleep and without his business partners at his side, he’d lost any sense of being anchored in a familiar world. It seemed absurd that he could be so close to the urban sprawl of London, to the opulence of his home in Surrey’s Stockbroker Belt, yet be here, in primeval forest. Something indistinct moved in the dark tangle of roots, branches, and leaves facing him. It made no noise and was almost intangible: just a sense of movement where there should be none. Overcome by a sudden sense of dread, Oakshott reached for his rifle. What was it his instructor told him only last week? Dammit, the cold was freezing his brain. What was it? Oh, yes, ‘Dead Man’s Click. Remember that and you won’t be embarrassed. Almost every firearm newbie forgets and looks a fool. Make sure you’re not one of ‘em.’ He looked down for the safety catch. His fingers trembled as he found the little lever and pushed it to ‘Off’.

Oakshott’s breath now came in short pants. Rifle held at the ready, he stared unblinking and wide-eyed at the tangle of brambles and holly bushes. But he was no woodsman; he did not see the two large, yellow-gold cat’s eyes that stared back from the shadowed undergrowth.



Downslope and across the clearing, Zaharkin gutted the carcass. As he worked, steam rose from bloodstained hand and dripping knife blade.

‘Bloody good shot, Alexei,’ said Beacon.

‘Aye, well done, *tovarisch*,’ said Jervis.

The oligarch ignored them. He shoved the deer’s entrails to one side then cut deeper into its thorax.

‘I like watching a billionaire in his natural environment,’ Beacon said. ‘It’s a revelation.’

Jervis snickered in amusement.

Zaharkin’s deep laugh echoed across the narrow valley. ‘Ha, yes, this is true,’ he said. ‘I kill and gut my prey in business just like in hunting, here—’

He ripped out the deer’s heart and offered it to Beacon. It twitched in Zaharkin’s grip.

The Scot’s plump face went pale. ‘You have got to be joking,’ he said.

‘What, you not like to get hands dirty, Mr. Beacon?’ said Zaharkin. ‘Typical British. If I invest in your Swanmere expansion, I will not be afraid, not like your banks. Look...’

Zaharkin squeezed the blood from the heart.

‘For Christ’s sake, Alexei,’ said Jervis.

‘There. It has no blood, no more. Just like English property developer, heh?’

He laughed again then held the heart out to Jervis.

‘How about you? You weak like your friend? Take it, take it.’

His face contorted in disgust, Jervis accepted the still warm organ. Beacon sighed with relief.



The cat moved towards the hapless Oakshott. Hunched low and silent, it stayed hidden deep in the forest’s darkness until a glint of light from the pale sky caught its amber eyes.

To be able to pick out the presence of a predator watching you from within a welter of confusing detail is an instinct embedded deep in most creatures, even Oakshott. He saw the eyes, instantly recognised them as belonging to a cat and almost relaxed. Almost. It took a fraction of second to understand that approaching him, indistinct as its form might be, was not a domestic lap cat. The size of a large hound, it exuded a menace and raw power that no dog, not even the fiercest Rottweiler, could match. Thick muscles bulged and stretched beneath sleek black fur.

Quaking with terror, Oakshott scabbled backwards. The big panther was almost clear of the undergrowth, a mere ten paces away. Oakshott’s spine came up hard against a tree root. There was nowhere left to go. He looked down almost in puzzlement at what he held in his hands.

The rifle.

His cold-numbed fingers fumbled for the trigger.



‘Snifter, Alexei?’

Beacon passed an opened silver hip flask to Zaharkin who inhaled the honey-sweet fumes wafting from it.

‘Malt whisky? Oho, good, almost as good as vodka, no?’

He took a swig then returned the flask, complete with bloody fingerprints. Beacon received it disdainfully in his handkerchief. He wiped the silver clean then glanced to his left, where Jervis still stood with deer heart in hand, unsure what to do with his trophy. Plainly, his patrician friend would be no use right now, but with Zaharkin in such a good mood, this might be the right moment to press him for his decision.

‘Alexei,’ said Beacon, ‘a minute ago you mentioned Swanmere Phase Two. Why don’t we—’

A terrified, drawn-out scream made them turn in alarm towards the hollow. A rifle shot cut hard through the still air.

‘Oakshott,’ said Jervis. ‘What’s the idiot done now?’

He tossed the stag’s heart aside and, with the other two close behind, ran towards the evergreen wall of holly that sheltered Oakshott.



Rifle gripped tight in his hands, Oakshott was rigid with fright. He refused to make eye contact with them, but simply stared at the bushes. Beacon crouched at his side.

‘You okay, Oakers? What happened?’ he said.

Oakshott looked at him then stuttered his reply. ‘Eyes, yellow eyes. And darkness. Darkness, black, it was black.’

Zaharkin snorted with disgust.

‘He is drunk.’

‘I missed it,’ said Oakshott. ‘Oh God, it’s still out there. I missed it.’

Both his friends were impressed by the unusual tone of sincerity in his voice. For once, Jervis spoke gently.

‘What’s out there?’ he said.

‘Eyes—’

Oakshott vomited long and colourfully.

Off balance, Beacon lurched backwards. ‘Jesus, Oakers, mind my boots. They’re brand new.’

‘Eyes. Cat’s eyes,’ came the vomit-muffled reply.

Jervis and Zaharkin exchanged sceptical looks.

‘Too drunk,’ Zaharkin said with certainty. ‘Sees pussy cat, he shoots. Weak man.’ Disgusted, he turned away and walked back to his kill.

Careful to position himself where any further puke was unlikely to spatter him, Jervis crouched at the side of his distraught friend.

‘Come on, old boy, let’s get you home.’ He hooked a hand under Oakshott’s right armpit. ‘The Russki’s blasted vodka has well and truly done for you.’



With a grunt, Zaharkin slung the dead deer across his shoulders. The effort of carrying such a weight might make him stagger, but he was pleased with the hunt. It was not a trophy beast, for sure, yet a mature buck was a worthy prize. It would show his disrespectful pair of bodyguards that he still had what it took. Valeri and Konstantin had teased him mercilessly about this outing with the British weaklings.

Right on cue, slipping and sliding in the slush and snow, the trio of property developers passed him. He shook his head in amazement. It baffled Zaharkin that clueless fools like these could even be of the same species as him.

Supported by his friends, Oakshott continued his hyperventilated babble about the encounter with the beast.

‘A monster—black—so big—coming for me!’

‘Sure, Oakers, monsters in Surrey,’ Beacon said. He ventured a worried glance back over his shoulder. Ignorant of the fact that, days ago, Zaharkin had decided to invest in their venture, Beacon was sure they had made a disastrous impression. He had no idea that this hunting trip was simply the bored oligarch’s excuse to have some fun at their expense.

‘Shooting at someone’s pet,’ said Jervis. ‘What an absolute idiot.’

‘You don’t believe me? It was right there you bloody stupid—’ Oakshott’s outrage was choked off by the vomit that rose again in his throat.

Zaharkin scowled at his departing guests then turned to look again at the holly thicket. The sun was out and the dark green bushes carried no hint of menace. And yet, what? A deeper frown creased his face as he shrugged his kill into a more comfortable position. There had been that strange rancid smell. A veteran hunter, he had no doubt it was an animal’s scent, yet it was like nothing he had encountered before. Worse stink than a bear. And the weird moment of absolute quiet? He shook his head in puzzlement, but the billionaire had never allowed himself the luxury of introspection and he wasn’t going to begin now, not when a deer’s damp blood was soaking into the shoulders of his jacket.

‘*Chush' sobach'ya,*’ Zaharkin said. ‘Bullshit.’

He shivered; it was time to go, time for a hearty breakfast and the comforts of home. Zaharkin sniffed the air again, gave a final shake of his head then trudged along behind the three men.



High on the valley slope, crouched behind the thick trunk of an oak seeded long before the Napoleonic Wars, a tall, grey-haired hunter with a weather-beaten face watched them leave. Careful to stay hidden, Bob Coulston had admired Zaharkin’s shot, then observed the hunting party’s strange back-and-forth pantomime with amusement that became swiftly converted to disquiet. Fragments of Oakshott’s strident description of the ‘monster’ carried up to him. If any of it was true then he was certain events had taken a disastrous turn for the worse.

As soon as Zaharkin stomped out of sight, Coulston broke cover. He approached the hollow with trepidation. His large calibre rifle unslung, he took care to make sure the gun's muzzle pointed wherever his eyes scanned.

Rifle held in right hand and with finger on trigger, Coulston parted the holly leaves, grimacing as their sharp edges pricked his skin of his left hand. He stopped to listen for anything out of the ordinary, but heard only the wind in the trees and the rippling song of a nearby wren. He carefully surveyed his surrounds then he too sniffed the air for a scent he'd recently come to recognise and fear.

Nothing.

Only now, when satisfied there was no immediate danger, did Coulston examine the ground. Zaharkin's prone position was obvious, as was the churned and vomit-flecked snow bank where Oakshott had encountered... what? Coulston swung around to face the undergrowth opposite.

He spoke in the faintest of murmurs. 'So, it came from here.'

Carefully, ever so carefully, Coulston stepped between two bushes and into the thicket. The flutter of the tubby wren as it flew deeper into the undergrowth made him jump with fright.

'Steady, boy, steady. If the bird feels safe, so should you.'

But his words of reassurance rang hollow. He knew the stakes, knew he was in the worst position possible should the big cat lurk nearby. Close-up, his unwieldy rifle gave him scant protection. There would be little warning of an attack and less chance of survival. His hunter's instincts told him the cat had fled, but why? He feared the worse, but had to know, had to be sure. It was time to calm his racing heartbeat. He took five deep breaths then, crouching low, pushed further into the undergrowth.

A handful of paces in, he found tracks. In a small patch of snow were four paw prints. Big paw prints, approximately the width of his hand, three in snow, and one in mud. Coulston hesitated. Was it mud? It didn't look right. Even with the sun shining bright, this deep into the murky undergrowth it was hard to make out the detail. He leant forwards. Fascinated by his behaviour, the watching wren burbled its song again. Coulston's left fingers brushed the surface of the dark paw print. He brought his fingertips close to his face. They were red. This was not mud. It was blood.

'Oh, the bloody fool!'

The stupid drunk had achieved the worst of all outcomes; he'd wounded the beast. A tale came to Coulston, a dimly remembered story told by his grandfather, it warned of the one thing deadlier than a big cat: a wounded big cat.

A dark cloud slid across the sun's face and the wren's song stopped suddenly in mid-phrase. Coulston listened hard. Once more, the woods fell unnaturally still. Unnerved by the silence and the growing gloom, he no longer made an effort to fight the fear. Adrenaline coursed through his body. The hunter fled the thicket with no pretence at poise or dignity.

Coulston retreated backwards down the slope and towards the open ground along the streambed. He recalled something else his grandfather had said: never turn your back on a big cat. Not if you want to live.



— About the Author —

Jack Churchill is the pen name adopted by Martin Belderson to avoid confusion between his fiction and non-fiction books. Trained at the BBC as a director, he has made more than thirty full-length documentary films, mostly in the fields of natural history, science and adventure sport. During that time, he has been charged by rhinos, chased by elephants, been caught up in sea-battles, filmed in the Hot Zone of an Ebola Fever outbreak, fallen off mountains, and once trod on a sleeping bushmaster viper. He regards himself as very lucky to be alive. Along the way, Martin has also won quite a few awards and nominations for his films, screenplays, and short stories.

He is attempting to use the recent digital convergence of the creative arts to weave writing, graphic design, film-making, and drama production into a single career. It's horribly complicated. If it fails, he plans to go back to one of his first jobs: selling potatoes door-to-door. It might be easier.

For more information about the author's encounters with big cats, videos, details of the cover art, big cats in Britain, and much more go to the [Big Cat](http://www.4winds-productions.com/big-cat.html) web page (www.4winds-productions.com/big-cat.html).

— Questions, Comments & Competitions —

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That Big Cat Ring Tone

If you want to check out Bob Coulston's terrible taste in ring tones, click on the this link, [Big Black Cat](#). It's a keyword search of music on Amazon. And here's a keyword music search for [big cat](#). Of course, by far the best big cat track is David Bowie's contribution to the [Cat People](#) soundtrack.

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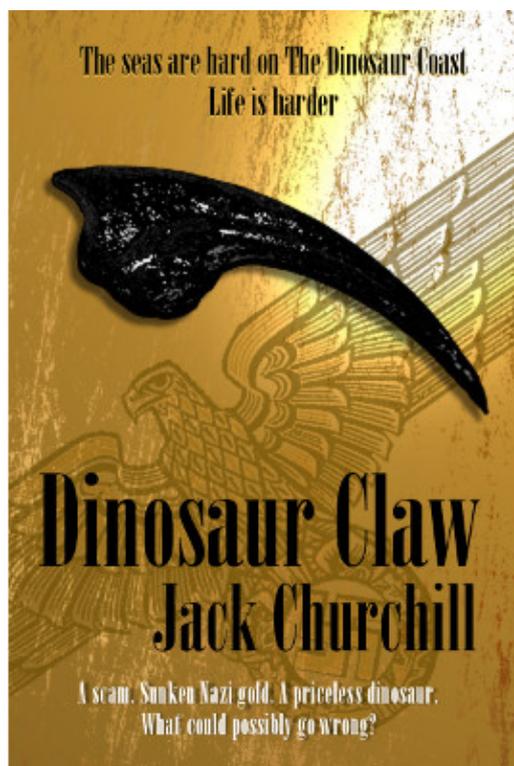
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Thank you,
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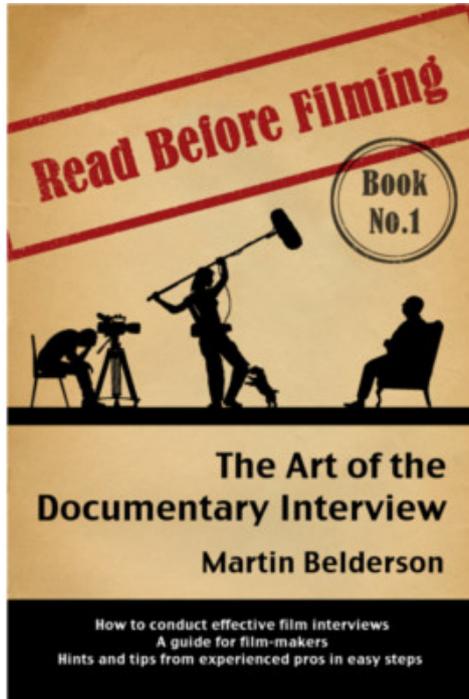
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