

Wild cat in the woods

The sun was still high in the sky, but it was time to get back. I stopped to look once more at the view before starting to make my way down the track again. It was darker under the trees, and cooler. There was no-one about – at least not now. I thought I had heard an odd cry earlier; it might have been a bird, or just someone fooling around, but whatever was, nobody had appeared.

As I came to where another path joined mine, I heard running feet and turned to see two boys heading towards me, their arms flailing, their mouths agape. I stopped as they came to a skidding halt in front of me, both gabbling frantically.

“Whoa, one at a time, kids. What’s wrong?”

“There’s a man!”

“He’s bleeding!”

“He’s hurt bad – he can’t talk – he won’t wake up!”

“Show me, quick.” And they seized my hands and dragged me up the other path, half running, half hysterical in their shock. They were young, only about ten years old. I was aware that one of them was in tears and trying not to show it. I squeezed his hand, but made no other sign that I’d noticed.

There was indeed a man, bleeding and unconscious, lying half on the path and half in the bluebells under the trees. He was face down, and the blood had pooled from somewhere under him. I flung off my backpack and knelt beside him.

“Help me to turn him,” I said. They knelt down reluctantly and between us we turned the man to lie on his side so that I could check his airway and try to find out what had happened. He was certainly breathing, so at least he was alive, and the flow of blood was sluggish – was that a good thing, or was he dying? Oh God, and I had none of my equipment with me.

I felt for his pulse, which was weak. “You must go and phone for the police and an ambulance,” I said to the boys. “There’s a farmhouse by the gate at the end of the path – someone will let you phone.”

“It’s my house,” said one of the boys, the one who wasn’t tearful. “I’ll go. Ben, you stay with the lady and look after her.” And he dashed off, leaving Ben and me with the helpless man. We looked at each other, he with eyes very wide and frightened. “We’ll see what we can do for him, shall we? You’re being very brave. I’m proud of you,” I said, and the boy relaxed just a little and rubbed his sleeve over the remains of his tears.

Startlingly, the man wore a shoulder holster under his jacket, but there was no gun. I wasn’t sure whether to be glad or not. It might mean his attacker had it and he could still be around. Or was *he* the villain in this? He didn’t look very villainous; he even seemed to be wearing a suit. I saw that he was quite young and might even be quite nice looking under all the dirt.

The white shirt was wet with blood, and I unbuttoned it to reveal a messy wound under his ribs. Ben, hissed in horror at the sight. “Sorry Ben, this is awful for you, but I know you can cope.” He was a little green. “Listen, open my backpack. You’ll find a small first aid box. Let’s see if there’s anything we can do here.” It was way beyond what the contents of my first aid kit would help with, but it meant Ben could make himself useful. “That’s it, well done.”

Turning him on his back, with some difficulty even with Ben's help, I lifted the man's head and shoulders onto my lap. In his helpless state, he was surprisingly heavy, though he wasn't very big. His cheek and hair were gritty with dust and gravel. Ben, at my suggestion, then raised the man's knees so that he was more folded, in the hope of closing the wound. It didn't seem to make anything worse. He hadn't made a sound till now, being apparently quite far gone, but he groaned with the moving of his body. All I could do was to clean him up a bit. My sticking plasters and bits of bandage were no use here, and, having nothing more useful to hand, I didn't like to touch the wound for fear of damaging him further.

Ben told me they had stumbled upon him just before they saw me. They hadn't heard anything or seen anyone. He could have been there for hours, unless the cry I had heard half an hour or so earlier had been his. I couldn't bear the thought of what might become of him before help arrived; please God, don't let him die. As we stared at him, the sound of heavy running feet reached our ears, but before Ben and I could react to the fear we suddenly felt, a farmer appeared in muddy boots together with the other boy, who was evidently his son.

"They're on their way," he gasped out as he knelt beside us. "Won't be long. Who is he? What happened here?"

"I've no idea. The boys found him before I came along."

"Is he alive?"

"Just about." I brushed the man's hair gently off his brow, and ruffled some of the dirt out of it; he sighed and his eyelids fluttered.

I bent over him. "Can you speak? Can you tell us what happened?"

Whatever it was he said was a quite unintelligible mumble. "What language was that?" said the farmer.

"It sounded like Russian."

"Russian? – Russian? What the hell...?"

Then came a bleeping noise, from his jacket, it seemed. I looked for the inner pocket where a silver pen appeared to be the source of the sound. I pulled it out by the top, which came off. The bleeping stopped. I examined the two parts and fitted the top the other way up – it looked like a microphone transmitter of some kind. As I did so, an anxious voice came from it, giving some sort of call sign, and calling a name.

"Hello," I said. "Who's that?"

"Who are *you*?" enquired the voice; it sounded American.

"My name's Anna. I'm looking after the man who owns this thing. He's badly hurt. We've called an ambulance."

"Who's we?"

I looked at the farmer and held out the pen. "Jack Baynes, my son Jo and his friend Ben. I'm a farmer, he's on my land," he said into it.

"Is he OK?"

"He's unconscious," I answered. "I think he's lost a lot of blood. It looks like a stab wound in his side."

"Ah...I see. Right. Well, I'm glad you found him, he's very valuable - please take care of him. I'll be with you as soon as I can. We have a trace on him – it's in his lapel – don't

separate him from it. I'll see you later. Out." And the conversation ceased before I could ask any questions.

We all looked at each other in astonishment. It felt quite surreal. Who were these people?

It wasn't long before we heard the sound of the ambulance. With it came a police car. As the medics were attending to the young man, I told what little I knew. The policeman searched the man's pockets and found an identity badge.

"Hm," he said, "this is secret service stuff. They'll have to deal with this." He returned it to the pocket and handed me the jacket. They performed a half-hearted search for clues – and presumably for the gun – but found nothing, merely flattening some bluebells in the process. The warmth of the afternoon had brought out their overpowering scent – somewhat incongruously in the circumstances.

I said I would accompany the young man to the hospital and wait to talk to his friend when he arrived. "You say someone's coming for him?" asked the policeman, sounding relieved – non-Metropolitan police forces don't normally get to deal with spies.

"Yes," I replied, "What do you think they will want?"

"I don't know, Madam," he replied, "but they'll want to talk to you. I expect they'll see you home as you've helped one of their own." And with that, he and his partner left.

The farmer kindly offered to come with me to the hospital or pick me up later. "I'll be fine," I replied. "Like the policeman said, I expect this man's colleagues will see me home. I'll phone you if they don't." I promised to let them know how things went anyway, and got into the ambulance.

I sat with the young man and held his hand on the journey to the nearest hospital – whether for his comfort or mine, I wasn't too sure, but I was relieved to find it was still warm and his pulse was still there. When we arrived, he was immediately whisked off to the operating theatre, leaving me feeling a little lost – I had no rights over him, of course. By now it was getting quite late and I was hungry. The nurses were kind and when I said I had to wait for the man's friend, they found me some food – just a sandwich and a cup of tea, but it kept me going. Then I sat, wondering what I'd got myself into; it had been a fairly ordinary holiday up to now. Then I remembered that I ought to phone my landlady and went to find a public phone box.

In the end, I told her very little more than that I had found a badly injured man and was waiting to talk to his friends. I didn't mention anything else about him. She was sympathetic, and said she would sit up and wait for me – it sounded quite exciting. I told her I didn't know when I'd be back, and would let myself in. Then I went back to wait, still clutching the man's jacket, which I had insisted I needed to keep with me.

I was half asleep, so it must have been some time later that someone came to tell me that all was well. "Can I see him?" I asked.

They already knew that it was a sensitive matter; and, because I had his jacket and was waiting for his friends, they said, "He's still asleep, but you can sit and wait with him if you like. He's in a side ward on his own."

He lay unmoving on his pillow, linked up to various drips – blood, saline solution, and the usual tubes elsewhere. He wore an oxygen mask, but was breathing unaided, which I was

glad to see, though he had that worryingly grey look that people sometimes have after an operation, that makes them look as if they're dying. The fair hair was tidy now, and clean; I saw it was bleached almost platinum on top by the sun. I wondered where – it couldn't have been round here – and I sat back in the chair and watched him, hoping his friend would turn up soon.

I must have dropped off for a while but woke when a nurse came in to check him. He stirred, but didn't open his eyes. Awake myself now, I just sat watching, and when he stirred again, I took his hand and stroked it gently. It jerked and he flung me off; he gave a little cry, his eyelids fluttered wildly, and he muttered in his sleep. He was like a wild creature, conditioned to fight. "It's all right," I said, "you're safe, I won't hurt you." His eyes opened and he looked up, trying to focus. "Kto tam?" he whispered, and tried to push the mask off. I lifted it gently – and temporarily.

"Ya Anna, ya zdes," I replied.

"Kto vy?"

"Druga."

"Gdye ya?"

"V'bolnitsye."

He sighed. I replaced the mask and took his hand again and this time he allowed me to hold it. The blue eyes closed and his breathing deepened. I sat watching him. He was good-looking, as I had thought he might be. Broad forehead; a straight, almost beaky nose; a strong, rounded chin, a sensitive mouth. It was a very beautiful face – who on earth was he? What was he involved in?

I was half asleep again, resting my head on the bed, when the door opened and the nurse allowed another man to come in. I sat up and, as he greeted me, I recognised the voice I had heard on the silver pen.

"Yes, I'm Anna," I replied to his questions, "your friend has been awake just briefly. We spoke in Russian."

"You speak Russian?"

"A bit – my grandmother is Russian. He asked who I was, and where he was, that's all. I told him I was a friend and he was in hospital and he went back to sleep."

He introduced himself, and sat down in the chair opposite, looking anxiously at his friend. He saw that I was still holding his hand and looked surprised. "Didn't he hit you?" he asked.

"He tried to, but I talked to him and told him he was safe, and he let me go on holding it," I replied, adding, "– that was in English, now I come to think of it. So, who is he? Who are you?"

"Ah – we're law enforcement agents. We're on an operation here."

"But you're from America, aren't you? And he's Russian. The police said it was a secret service thing – they went away and didn't want to take any details." I looked at the sleeping man and back at his friend again, and asked, "Are you secret service? How come you're working together?"

"He's Ukrainian, actually, but ours is an international agency, sort of secret service if you like. Anyway, it's above national politics and national police forces." He watched his friend

as he spoke. The young man was beginning to stir at the sound of our voices. His eyes opened again, and this time focussed on the other man and widened. “Ah, ty zdes! Opazdyvaesh – inogda,” he whispered from under the mask, and half smiled. His friend grinned and said, “Of course I’m here, and I’m not that late, my ungrateful little friend.” He looked across at me, and added, “You’ve been in the good hands of this very attractive lady.” (I’m not the simpering kind, and I didn’t simper now.)

“She smells of flowers. She has looked after me, I’m fine now,” the young man said, in just slightly accented English. His eyes closed again. His friend looked baffled, and sniffed. “Flowers?” he said.

“I think he means where we found him, lying among the bluebells. The scent was amazing, but I didn’t think he would have been aware of it.” And I then told him what I knew about what had happened.

“Not many young women would have been as brave as you,” he commented.

“I wasn’t brave. The little boys were braver, they tried to help even though they were so frightened.”

“And you weren’t?” he said sceptically. “All the same, I’m very grateful to you, and extremely glad you were there.”

“Ya tozhe – me too,” came from the bed.

“Well, I’m going to take this young lady home now, so you get some sleep. I’ll be back later, tovarisch. There’s a guard outside, so no-one can get in – and you can’t escape, either. So, don’t try it!”

“I’ll wait for you. Now leave me in peace.” Then opening his eyes again, he added, “Goodnight, Miss...?”

“Anna. Goodnight, and sleep well. I’ll come and see how you are tomorrow, if I may.”

“Yes. Please come.”

His friend grinned, and led me out. There was indeed a guard, sitting outside, arms folded, and apparently prepared to spend the rest of the night there. The American agent drove me back to my landlady’s house which wasn’t all that far, and waited with me as I unlocked the door. Mrs Goodacre was still up, though it was past midnight, and came to the door beaming. She invited my companion in and, somewhat to my surprise, he accepted. I realised quite soon that it was because he wanted to control what was said about what had happened, and to disguise his and his friend’s real reasons for being there. He chatted charmingly about this and that; he also manfully drank Mrs Goodacre’s tea and more happily ate some of her cake, and finally took his leave.

I showed him out, and he thanked me again, saying quietly, “Please keep as much of this to yourself as possible. I don’t want you to find yourself in danger.” He gave me a card with a number to ring if I needed to. “Is it all right if I come and see your friend tomorrow?” I asked.

“Sure; he’ll be better company by then.”

I held out my hand to shake his, but he raised it to his lips and kissed it instead, and left. A bit of a ladies’ man, evidently.

Mrs G was full of praise for the dark American’s charm and good manners. “What an exciting day for you, my dear,” she said, “you look very tired.”

“I’ll be glad to get to bed,” I told her, but tired or not I slept badly, full of anxious dreams about a white face and blue eyes.

Early next morning I telephoned the farmer to tell him how things were, and asked him to thank the boys. He asked about the secret service business, and I said it was all being managed quietly and we shouldn’t talk about it in case it brought danger to us. He accepted that with some relief and wished me well.

Later, as I was getting ready to leave, there was a knock at the door. A delivery man stood there with two enormous bouquets of flowers. We took them in and examined the labels. One for me, one for Mrs Goodacre, “With grateful thanks”. That was all they said.

“Well!” said Mrs Goodacre, smiling at her armful, “your charming American friend, I suppose.”

“Looks like it. Aren’t they nice. Will you need some help with them?” I said.

“No, you be off, dear. I’ll get these sorted – though I’ll have to go round to the neighbours and borrow some vases.”

“Mrs G, don’t tell them too much, will you? That man last night, he said we might be in danger if we talked about it.” She looked at me.

“I’ll be careful,” she said, “don’t worry. I got the idea it was something more than an accident.”

The guard let me go in, and I found the young man (I mustn’t use his name, even now. I’ll call him Malchik, he looked so small and young) propped up on pillows looking rather bored. He was no longer grey-looking, just very white, with dark shadows under his eyes. He was also still linked up to the drips, and unable to move much. He looked round and, not immediately recognising me, raised his eyebrows, then he relaxed and smiled.

“I remember now, it’s Anne?”

“Anna. How are you? You’re looking much better.”

“I’m fine, thanks to you. I might not have survived if you hadn’t found me.”

“It was the boys that found you, I didn’t do much.”

“You stayed. You held my hand – I knew I was safe.”

I laughed. “You threw me off last night in here. You were like a wild creature in captivity. Your friend was surprised you hadn’t hit me.”

He flushed a little. “I’m very sorry; it’s a reflex. You’re right, it *is* a bit like being wild – always ready for an attack. But, how are *you*? – you stayed till my partner came; we must have badly messed up your evening. I guess you got home safely.”

“It’s nothing, you needn’t worry about me. Your friend took me back to my digs. My landlady and I have had our thanks anyway – two enormous bouquets arrived this morning. She’s thrilled.”

“That’ll be old Suave himself. He’s good at remembering stuff like that.”

“Well, it was a very nice gesture. I love flowers. Do you remember the bluebells?”

He looked enquiringly. “You said I smelled of flowers – it wasn’t me; you had been lying on a carpet of bluebells.”

“Is that what they were? Amazing scent, and that beautiful colour there, under the trees.”

“It’s one of the joys of late spring. They’re really lovely,” I said.

“I’m sorry to have spoiled your walk,” he said.

“I think your walk was more spoiled than mine. Can I get you anything – something to read, for instance?”

He sighed. “I doubt if there is anything around fit to read,” he said. “Won’t you stay a bit longer, and talk to me?” Then he looked up, a little sheepishly, “I’m sorry, you must have lots more important things to do.”

“I’m on holiday, I’m free to do as I like. And I’d like to stay and talk.”

“You’re very kind; that’s wonderful. So, tell me, how do you know my language?”

We seemed to have a lot of interests, as well as some Russian heritage, in common. When Mr Suave arrived, he looked quite surprised to see us laughing together. Malchik had to hold his side because it was painful to laugh, but his colour was so much better that I couldn’t be too anxious.

“Good afternoon, my children, how are we today?”

Malchik grinned up at him, “I’m fine, my friend. I have had the company of a lovely woman, who knows my language and a lot more. If this could happen every time, it would make it all worth it.”

Mr Suave smiled at us, then I remembered to thank him for the flowers.

“My pleasure,” he said.

We chatted some more, but it quickly became clear that Malchik was now tired out and needed to sleep. “I’d better go,” I said, “can I come and see you tomorrow or would you prefer to rest?”

He held out his hand. “Come – please,” he said.

“Then of course I will.”

Mr Suave took me home again, which was kind of him. He didn’t stay, just said we’d presumably meet again at the hospital, which I took to be permission to continue visiting.

I went every day for several days to spend an hour or so with Malchik. His friend was evidently busy, and not often there so we had the time alone together. We held hands as we talked; he let me comb his hair.

I was just leaving one day, when Mr Suave arrived. He greeted me cordially, and said, “Oh, I’m sorry to have missed you again. Let me take you out to dinner later.” A look passed over Malchik’s face, which I wasn’t sure how to interpret.

“That would be nice,” I said, and looked at Malchik. “I’ll leave you both – you must have things to discuss. Shall I see you tomorrow?” and I bent to kiss his cheek, as usual, only for him to turn his head so that it was his lips I kissed. Mr Suave looked taken aback (so was I), but Malchik kept my hand for a moment and looked up at me.

“I’ll look forward to it,” he said.

There wasn't a lot of choice of places to eat, but Mr Suave had evidently done a reconnaissance and took me to a small restaurant in the country. He was very pleasant company, very easy to talk to. He didn't say much about his and his friend's work, but asked about mine.

"I'm a vet." He looked baffled, so I added, "you know, animal doctor."

"Ah. In America, vet means veteran, a soldier. You're a veterinarian – that explains how you managed my wild friend when he lashed out," he chuckled.

"Yes, of course," and I laughed too, remembering. "I hadn't thought of it like that. I *am* rather used to dealing with creatures that fight back – specially cats, they're the worst."

"He likes cats. He's very like one, himself – you should see him climb a building." That sounded interesting, but it was unlikely I would ever see him do any such thing.

"I like cats, too," I said. "You can never take them for granted. You only have them on their terms."

"I'm interested you should say that," he said.

We were having coffee in the lounge. I noticed he always chose to sit with his back to the wall, facing the room, wherever he was. He did so here, where we were in a quiet corner. He turned to me now, looking quite serious. "Anna, I don't want you to take this amiss, but just as a friendly piece of advice." He paused as if thinking how best to put it. "I get the impression that you and my friend are hitting it off rather well."

"Meaning?"

"I mean, he's attracted to you and you to him. Am I right?"

"I haven't spent much time with him, "I said, a little defensively, "– and he's not exactly in a state to react normally to anyone."

"I know him; I saw the way he looked at you. You, too – you kissed him."

"More kissed against than kissing. Mine was meant to be a sisterly kiss."

"Was it? Really? You've got much closer to him physically than most people do – ever. He's a very attractive guy, it wouldn't be surprising if you felt more than sisterly."

It was true. I hadn't been as professionally distant as I would have been with a sick animal. I remained silent, and he continued, "It's dangerous to get close to people like us. Be warned, if you're tempted to. I'm sorry – this sounds so ungrateful. You've been wonderful, so brave, and so kind to him. But you've seen how he's conditioned to react to physical contact. He's dangerous – we all are. We aren't pussycats. His reactions to - what shall I say - more-*loving* contact, could be quite intense. All I'm saying is – forgive me – don't break your heart over him. He won't, he can't, commit to anyone. In our line of work, it's impossible."

"Are you like that, too?"

"Yes. None of us can commit. I'm not fiery underneath like him, I protect myself in other ways – so I would break your heart too, if you were attracted to me."

"You're not just jealous, by any chance?"

He smiled. "Nothing so vulgar, Anna. I find you attractive, and if you felt the same about me, I would take my chance. But it wouldn't be wise for you to respond – you seem to me to be a very loving, loyal person. Not someone with fly-by-night emotions. Loving and leaving you

would be a crime – and that’s what I would do... And it’s what he would do, despite himself.”

“You’re very honest. Have you ever broken someone’s heart?”

He shrugged, “I hope not.”

“Has *your* heart ever been broken?”

“Yes – of course. That’s why I’m saying all this.”

“What about your friend?”

“He’s never discussed his past. The girls in the office call him the Ice Prince – he keeps a very tight rein on his feelings; almost never gives himself away. But you’ve caught him at his most vulnerable.”

“I won’t hurt him,” I said. He looked at me in surprise. “You are asking me not to, aren’t you?”

“You’re very quick, aren’t you – of course that’s what I’m asking. I love him like a brother; I can’t bear to see him hurt, physically or any other way.”

I arrived at the hospital early the next afternoon and found Malchik asleep. I sat down and watched him, feeling very much as if I were invading his privacy. Tempted but, now afraid for other reasons of his violent reaction to being touched, I made no attempt to hold his hand or stroke his hair. It was the nurse who woke him. She too was careful about touching him. She had evidently been told, or had learned from experience, to speak to him first.

He opened his eyes and glared at her. This was a very fierce cat, indeed. I had experience of felines like him, and scratches to prove it. Mr Suave was right; he was dangerous; not just a domestic cat with fierce tendencies, but a wild cat.

He then became aware of me and his smile lit his face. Don’t break your heart over him, Mr Suave had said, maybe assuming his warning was in time.

The nurse sent me out while she carried out the routine procedures of changing the drips and generally cleaning him up. When I went back he was pretty disgruntled by it, but held out his hand and drew me to the bedside.

“Do you treat your patients like that?” he said.

“Sometimes I have to. They don’t like it either.”

“How do you soothe them?”

“I let their owners do that, but I’m always kind to animals, even wild ones.”

“Always?” There was such intensity in those blue eyes. That look is quite dangerous in a wild creature.

“Always.”

He must have seen something in my expression. “Did you have a good time, last night? What did my partner say to you?”

“It was very pleasant. We talked about all sorts of things.” As if that was going to answer his question.

“Including me, of course. What did he say?”

Was honesty the best policy? I hoped so. “He noticed ... He told me not to let my heart be broken. What he meant was that I shouldn’t break yours, either.”

He looked outraged. “He thinks he’s my owner, does he? The one who has to soothe me. Doesn’t want me to –”

“He loves you,” I said. “Like a brother, he told me. He doesn’t like to see you hurt. He warned me not to.”

“You couldn’t hurt me. And I don’t want to hurt you,” he added.

“I know, and you won’t,” I replied, and disregarding my experience of unreliable felines, I leaned forward and kissed him. Not sensible, not keeping my heart whole. Quite mad.

Reluctantly withdrawing from an embrace that could have lasted for ever, I sat back, holding his hand, his fingers gripping mine. He watched me uncertainly. “You’re going away.”

“I’ll have to. I have to go home soon.”

“Don’t go yet.”

“I’m not planning to.”

He had graduated to a chair before I had to leave and go back to work. I spent every day that remained of my holiday with him before he was well enough to be recalled, which fortuitously happened on the same day.

So, perhaps fortunately, it remained a chaste and very brief love affair – hardly love, and not even an affair. My heart wasn’t broken, not quite. Nor was his. I took the possibly rather clichéd view that, for however short a time, it was better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.

I never saw him again; I never discovered what had really happened; but whenever I smelled the scent of bluebells, it would bring his image to mind, without fail. And when I encountered damaged and furious cats thereafter, it was with much more sympathy, in spite of the scratches.
