

JIM KJELGAARD

HIDDEN  
TRAIL

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# *HIDDEN TRAIL*



**JIM KJELGAARD**

**HIDDEN  
TRAIL**

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# Hidden Trail

chapter one

## *Mystery Herd*

Just in from a field trip and still dressed for the woods, Jase Mason parked his dilapidated jeep by the only vacant parking meter. Alighting stiffly, he dug a dime from his trousers, dropped it into the meter, and patted the curly head of the big Airedale that occupied the jeep's other seat.

"Stay here, Buckles," he ordered. "I'll go see what the Boss Man wants."

Buckles sighed and settled down to nap until his master returned. The dog's bored expression and the appearance of the jeep itself brought a fleeting grin to Jase's lips.

He'd parked between two sleek, expensive sedans. In contrast the jeep looked old and forlorn, piled high as it was with camping gear and showing all too plainly its many trips into back country where there might or might not be a trail. The impression that it did not belong here was materially strengthened by Buckles' obvious boredom with this city and desire to be out of it.

Jase started toward the domed building, the State Capitol, that stood well back on a spacious lawn. At a brisk walk he entered the building, scorned the wait for the elevator, and bounded up the marble steps leading to the second floor. He swung along a corridor, trying to feel the proper sense of awe and respect befitting the building where the governor held sway, the legislature argued, and the destinies of the state for which he worked were decided. But all he wanted to do was find out why he'd been so hurriedly called from his assignment of photographing beaver activity in the Dannager Valley. Then, he hoped, he and his cameras would be sent right back into the woods.

Jase opened a door, the glass top of which bore a neat sign proclaiming that this office was the domain of Dr. Robert Norton Goodell, of the Conservation Department. It sounded very formal, but Jase knew better. As long as the staff, which consisted of Jase as official photographer; a talented secretary and girl of all work named Marty Simpson; and the various rangers, wardens, and technicians who were his principal contributors, knew

where to find him, Bob Goodell, editor of *Forests and Waters*, was not one to worry as to whether his name appeared on the door or not.

Marty, whose nimble fingers had been flying over her typewriter keys, swung around and smiled as Jase entered.

“Well, well, well! If it isn’t our wild man! How’d you ever tear yourself away from the woods, Jase?”

“Had to see you again, Marty,” Jase grinned. “Did you get the pictures?”

“If you mean the beaver-dam ones, they came last week.”

“How were they?”

“So-so. Boss Man didn’t think too much of them.”

In spite of himself, Jase winced and Marty laughed.

“I shouldn’t joke about such a sacred subject, should I? They were good, Jase. Dr. Goodell is pretty excited about them.”

“That’s better!” Jase said in relief. “He sent for me. Do you know what it’s about?”

She shook her head. “No doubt some more earth-shaking conservation work.” Marty turned toward a closed door and raised her voice. “Dr. Goodell. Jase is here.”

“Thanks, Marty,” came a muffled voice from behind the door. “Be right out.”

After a moment the door opened and two men came out. The first was middle-aged but young-appearing Bob Goodell, officially the editor of *Forests and Waters* but unofficially the spark plug behind numerous conservation projects and unquestionably among the top men in his field. The second was Tom Rainse, the game warden who had steered Jase into his present job. Looking crisp and official in a freshly pressed uniform, the game warden ran his eyes over Jase’s rumpled clothes.

“If you aren’t a heck of a looking specimen to come barging into these here sacred halls!”

“I didn’t have a change of clothes.”

“You might at least have washed.”

“I did, but I’ve been jockeying an open jeep from Dannager Junction since half-past four this morning.”

“You aren’t exactly a model of what the well-dressed young bureaucrat should wear,” Dr. Goodell said amiably, “but I guess it doesn’t matter as long as you produce. Bring any more pictures?”

“Four films.” Jase took a carefully wrapped packet from his pocket. “They haven’t been processed yet.”

“I’ll take them over,” Marty Simpson said.

“Thanks, Marty,” Dr. Goodell told her. He was silent a moment. “Well, Jase, it looks as though your documentary film, *Pine and Porcupine*, is

going to get you into trouble this fall.”

“Trouble?” Jase’s heart skipped a beat.

“Not serious,” Tom Rainse put in. “Jase, your boss means only that he wants you to film another classical movie of nature’s outdoor wonderland, with me as technical adviser. That’s why I’m here.”

Dr. Goodell chuckled. “That’s right. Come into the office and we’ll talk it over.”

They entered Dr. Goodell’s office, which was the despair of Marty’s heart. She waged an unending battle to keep it tidy, but tidiness was not one of Dr. Goodell’s more pronounced characteristics. Papers recently pulled from a bulletin board were scattered on the desk or lying haphazardly on the floor. In their place was a single detailed map, which Jase looked at attentively.

It was a topographical map of the rugged Keewatin area, parts of which Jase had visited. In summer the Keewatin was the playground of thousands of tourists, but the only ones who ever ventured far from the highways were those whom various dude ranchers in the area guided to remote hunting and fishing spots. After hunting season and throughout the winter, when the Keewatin was virtually deserted, it became a wilderness almost as primitive as it had been before the first white man ever ventured into it.

Dr. Goodell stepped to the map, picked up a pointer, and indicated a colored area with his pointer. “This, Jase, is Whitestone National Park, as you know.” He then pointed to a small portion of the southern part of the Park. “Down here is the summer range of the Keewatin elk herd. Are you at all familiar with the place?”

“Just vaguely, from going through a couple of times,” Jase admitted.

“All right.” Dr. Goodell moved his pointer southward, outside the boundary of the Park. “This is Taborville, near which are the winter feeding grounds of the elk, in these valleys. The herd will soon be starting its migration from the Park and heading down to the more sheltered lowlands around Taborville for the winter. The Conservation Department wants a complete pictorial record, a movie documentary, of the migration. Can you do it?”

Jase shook his head. “I’d sure like to, but I haven’t the equipment.”

“For pete’s sake!” Tom Rainse snorted. “If you add any more cameras and gadgets to what you already have, you’ll have to hitch a trailer on that jeep. You made a swell movie of the porcupines on Kinderly Ridge. Why can’t you do this?”

“Filming porcupines, under summer conditions, is different from filming a herd of elk in winter.”

“An elk’s bigger’n a porcupine,” Tom pointed out, “and some of these are about as pokey. It should be an easy job.”

Jase grinned. “You’re a game warden. What do you know about photography?”

“It’s simple enough; it must be if you can do it. You just point your camera, press the little button, and there you are.”

“Give me strength!” Jase muttered.

Dr. Goodell laughed. “Could you do it if you had the right equipment?”

“I couldn’t promise a complete pictorial record if I had a hundred thousand dollars’ worth. One man can be in only one place at a time. With luck, I might get enough representative shots to piece the story together fairly well.”

Dr. Goodell said wryly, “I can’t promise a hundred thousand dollars’ worth, and naturally I don’t expect you to come back with a complete record of every elk on the migration. But I think I can see that you have the proper equipment.”

“That’s great! It sounds like a wonderful opportunity, and I’ll do my best. Now, just what’s involved?”

“That’s what Tom will explain. Warden Rainse, take over.”

Tom seated himself on the paper-littered desk and swung his feet. “First off,” he told Jase, “we’re not sending you out into the deep, cold woods to get wolf-et or elk-chawed by your poor little lonesome. For one thing, you’ll have that hairy mutt of yours, who’ll discourage any elk that might feel ornery. For another, I’m horning in on the deal too, but you’re going first.”

“Where?”

“About fifteen miles into Whitestone. You’ll get your jeep into the Park all right, but don’t figure on getting it out again.”

“Why not?”

“Snow will be too deep by the time we’re through this assignment. So when you’ve gone as far as you can go, drain the radiator, set the jeep on blocks, and somebody’ll take you back for it when spring comes. You’ll have to pack a toboggan for hauling your camp and camera gear and grub, but you needn’t load heavy on the grub. You’ll see why in a minute.

“Now, after you’ve left the jeep in Whitestone, get on the tail of this herd as it leaves summer pasture. Begin taking your pictures there, follow the herd down, and I’ll meet you on the border of the Park a week from Monday. That’s the opening day of the elk season—*outside* the Park, that is; no hunting is allowed in the Park. We’ll rendezvous at the road, where it enters the Park, at five o’clock that evening. I’ll have my pickup truck and plenty of grub for both of us. We’ll go on from there.”

“Wait a minute,” Jase objected. “You say I’m to meet you a week from Monday. Do the elk know about this timetable? Suppose the herd doesn’t get to the Park by then?”

Dr. Goodell looked at the warden and laughed. “That’s a good question, Tom. I told you Jase could use his head.”

Tom Rainse nodded. “I know it; I’ve seen him handle himself in the woods. You’re right, Jase. Nobody ever told these elk that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. They’ll ramble here and there, lay over in such and such a feeding place, and that all takes time. However, this isn’t one big herd, and the elk don’t all start or finish at the same time. They travel in bunches: a dozen elk, two dozen, fifty, usually with a bull or old cow leading each bunch. When you get to their summer range in the Park, some will have left already and some will come along behind you. So you can set your own pace, photographing as you go.”

“You see what we want, Jase?” Dr. Goodell put in. “Your film should show the movements of these small groups: how they vary in size, how they’re led, how they forage, how fast they travel--aspects that only motion pictures can record properly.”

“I see that,” Jase answered, “but there’s a basic problem here I can’t figure out. If the elk are protected in the Park, but are hunted outside, why do they migrate at all?”

“You catch up with an elk, you ask him,” Tom advised. “My own opinion is that threatening storms set ’em off. Other people think it’s an age-old migration instinct, or elk just feel like moving, or they leave the high country, where snow lingers until summer, just because the foraging is easier in a milder lowland climate. There are a dozen other theories, all of which may be wrong. Anyhow, they go.”

“How many are there altogether?” Jase asked.

The warden looked at Dr. Goodell, then spoke soberly. “That’s a question we’d like the answer to, Jase. The boys in the National Park Service, who take the summer census in Whitestone, say there are three thousand, which is about what the Park can accommodate. Yet last winter two state game wardens, including me, ran a tally that showed only half that number arriving at the winter grounds around Taborville.”

“Half! What happened to the rest?”

“Hunters got some. Last year six hundred elk permits were issued for the area and hunters took just under four hundred elk. Not all the elk congregate on the same feeding grounds, of course, but I’m taking that into account when I say about fifteen hundred arrived at Taborville. Any way you look at it, over a thousand elk disappeared somewhere between Whitestone and

Taborville. Yet the Park Service said there were well over two thousand back on the feeding grounds this summer!”

“Puzzling, isn’t it?” Dr. Goodell broke in. “Obviously the answer lies in the fact that all the Keewatin elk don’t winter around Taborville, where wardens can keep an eye on them. Now, if some of these missing elk are being winter-killed, dying of starvation, we want to stop it. By taking proper measures, we can issue more hunting permits and keep the herd in check both humanely and profitably.”

“What do you mean, profitably?” Jase asked.

Dr. Goodell smiled quietly. “It’s a matter of basic economics. The principal income this department has comes from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. Half the elk permits go to non-residents who pay a hundred dollars each for them, and many requests are turned down because there are not enough elk. If we could issue four hundred more permits to hunt animals that are being wasted now . . . Figure it out for yourself.”

“I see that,” Jase admitted, “but how could a thousand elk disappear without somebody knowing how and where?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Dr. Goodell answered. “One trouble is the division between federal authority, which the elk are under in the Park, and state management, which they come under the minute they cross the border. As far as the Whitestone authorities are concerned, the elk herd migrates from the Park at the beginning of winter, and their responsibility then ceases until the next summer. So the Park has no problem. We do, but our state game wardens are all needed here during hunting season, which is also migration time. Furthermore, they really have no business in the Park, even if we could spare them. That’s where you come in.”

“How’s that?” Jase asked in surprise.

“The Park authorities have welcomed the idea of a documentary film on the elk, and would like a print of it. So while you’re in Whitestone, officially filming the elk, you might learn something that would give us a lead. Even if you don’t find out anything, a movie of the animals’ movements and habits should help the hunting problem.”

“What hunting problem?”

“What we’re trying to do, Jase, is to get the state legislature, and perhaps the federal, to cooperate in establishing a more flexible method of hunting these elk. It’s now illegal to hunt them in Whitestone at all, but since they may decide to leave the Park at any time during a six-weeks period, it’s hard on the guides and hunters.”

“Why? It sounds to me as if all a hunter had to do was wait at the border and let the elk come to him.”

Tom Rainse snorted. “You don’t just decide to go elk hunting and go, you numbskull—especially if you’re a non-resident. It takes time, money, planning, reserving quarters and guides, and a few dozen other things. Suppose you’d paid a hundred dollars for a permit, come all the way from Chicago for three days of hunting, and then the blamed elk stayed in the Park until you had to go back home. How would you like that?”

“If I were an elk, I’d like it fine; that’s why I do my shooting with a camera. All right, I see your point, and I think I know what you want in this documentary. But about these missing elk. Couldn’t something else be happening to them besides getting lost and starving?”

Tom spoke slowly and thoughtfully. “My guess is that very few fall to predators; even a mountain lion has to be almighty hungry before it’ll tackle a full-grown elk. Of course, lions, coyotes, wolves, and possibly bears, do take the sick and crippled but that’s a merciful thing. Sure, there are natural hazards that account for some, though hardly eleven hundred.”

“How about poachers?”

“No doubt about it,” Tom said positively. “Not everybody leaves the Keewatin in winter and there’s always a market for elk meat with no questions asked. It’s a lead-pipe cinch that poachers get their share, but a little poaching wouldn’t account for a thousand elk. Neither would hungry Indians.”

“Indians?” Jase exclaimed. “Are you kidding?”

Tom slid from the desk, strode to the map, and pointed.

“Maybe seventy-five Indians, a mixture of tribes, hang out in the Keewatin. In tourist season, most of them work for the dude ranchers. They also stage shows in the Park for the tourists—dances and that sort of thing. In winter, and they have a winter village about here, along the east border of the Park, they turn to wood cutting and trapping. Since neither of these pays off much, I’ve a hunch they get hungry some of the time, and shoot anything they see. Can’t say I blame ’em—unofficially, that is. However, I doubt if they get more elk than an occasional stray, for the Indians are pretty far east of the elk’s regular migration paths.”

“Do the elk follow a distinct migration pattern?”

“Yes. Probably more than any other wild animal, they’re creatures of habit. I’ll show you.”

Tom took a pencil from his pocket, stepped in front of the map, and sketched. When he moved away, half a dozen dotted lines radiated southward from the known summer pastures to the known wintering grounds.

“That gives you the idea,” the warden told Jase. “As you see from the contour lines, the elk work their way down from the upland pastures.

Generally they follow the slopes, feeding morning and afternoon, and resting during the middle of the day.

“Now here’s what you do,” Tom went on. “Drive to Taborville and stock up on enough grub to last you ten days or so. From Taborville you take this road to the Park entrance, right here—that’s where we’ll meet a week from Monday. Once in the Park, stay on the road for fifteen miles, which will bring you to a flat area with big open meadows and stands of tamarack and pine. Drive in and around until you see elk, then stash the jeep, start taking your little pictures, and follow the elk right down to me. All clear?”

“Seems to be, but I’d like to have that map.”

“Certainly, Jase,” Dr. Goodell said. “That’s what it’s for.”

Jase folded the map and put it in his shirt pocket. As always when starting out on a new photographic adventure, he felt a rising excitement and an eagerness to be off. Of course he’d have to watch his step; there was always danger in the wilderness and accidents could happen to the unwary. But he was no longer inexperienced, and this new and fascinating challenge would give him the best opportunity yet toward his goal of becoming an outstanding wildlife photographer. He turned to Dr. Goodell.

“What about that extra equipment we were talking about?”

“What do you need, Jase?”

“Well, I should have another movie camera. I’ll need two so, if anything happens to either one, there’ll be a spare. Mine’s only a single lens, too. I could get a telephoto and a wide-angle lens for it, but I really need a turret head with a standard lens, a wide-angle, and a telephoto. That’s for instant change of lens when necessary. I think I should have two thousand feet of color film, and at least six hundred feet of fast black and white for uncertain light conditions. Then I’ll need snow filters, cold-weather cases for the cameras and some way to protect the film, and there will be a bit more. I’ll have to look around.”

“Tracey’s will rent you a second camera and whatever else you need, and have them charge the film to the Department,” Dr. Goodell said. “They open at nine in the morning and you can start for Taborville as soon as you get your equipment.”

“But I can get a long way down the road tonight!”

“Mrs. Goodell’s expecting you and Tom to be our guests tonight.”

“That’s very thoughtful, but I’d like to start right away!”

Tom Rainse and Dr. Goodell grinned knowingly at each other. Then both shook hands with Jase and wished him luck.

“I know this is a movie assignment, Jase,” Dr. Goodell told him, “but don’t forget a few still shots, too. We might want to do an article in *Forests and Waters* when you get back.”



“Sure thing, Boss,” Jase promised. “So long now!”

Marty Simpson looked up as Jase barged into the outer office.

“Where are you heading for in such a hurry now, Jase?”

“Top secret, Marty.”

Jase flung himself down the stairs, ran outside, and raced to his jeep. The wriggling Buckles rose to greet him as Jase climbed in and started the motor.

“Here we go!” he told the eager dog. “We’re off again, Buckles!”

## chapter two

# *Taborville*

Marvin Tracey, owner of Tracey's Store, had borrowed most of his ideas from a country store his father had owned in a backwater village under the shadow of the Rockies. The elder Tracey had had something to offer everyone, he'd understood thoroughly the merchandise he handled, and he had always offered a fair deal. Similarly, Marvin, who wanted to cater exclusively to outdoorsmen, sold everything anyone going into the wilderness could possibly use, and had personally tested every item he carried. It was Marvin who, having received a call from Dr. Goodell to the effect that Jase was on his way, met him when he entered.

Marvin valued many things, but there were few upon which he placed a higher worth than the work of the state Conservation Department. Aside from his friendship for Dr. Goodell, he knew that if it were not for the Department and its work there would soon be little to fish or hunt. Furthermore, he liked Dr. Goodell's young photographer, and wanted to see that he had the right equipment for his new assignment.

"Heard you were on your way, Jase," he said. "What can I do for you?"

Jase came directly to the point. "I want to rent a 16 mm. movie camera with a turret head containing a 6-inch telephoto lens, a 15 mm. wide angle, and a 25 mm. standard lens."

"Right. Any special make?"

Jase hesitated. There was a bewildering variety of cameras available and most of them were good. But there were certain factors that he must consider and he enumerated them.

"I must have something good and at the same time compact and not too heavy. The simpler the better; something that's easy to load and without too many gadgets that might be affected by sudden changes in temperature. The standard lens should be f 1.4, the wide angle f 1.9, and the telephoto f 4. All should be focussing; I don't want anything with a fixed focus. That's too—" He broke off and grinned sheepishly. "Here I go spending money, and it isn't mine. Think I should get something less expensive?"

Marvin smiled. "Dr. Goodell's leaving it up to us, and the lenses you've asked for are just about right. If the picture can be had, they'll get it. If I may offer a bit of advice, don't try to save pennies when quite a few dollars are already at stake, and don't come back kicking yourself because you missed a

sequence that you might have had with the proper lenses. The difference in the rental fee plus insurance isn't that great."

"That sort of makes sense to me, too."

"Good sense," Marvin assured him. "I think this may fill the bill."

He produced a 16 mm. camera, a used but expensive model with a turret head already fitted with a standard lens. Of simple operation, there were no sprockets or gears over which the film must be threaded and the whole thing weighed just a little more than six pounds. Marvin inserted a telephoto and a wide-angle lens in the turret head and held it out to Jase.

"I've used this camera and can guarantee it. What do you think?"

Jase's eyes gleamed as he handled the camera and tested its mechanism. It was *the* camera and some day, when and if wildlife photography made him rich enough, he would like one exactly like it.

"This is it," he declared. "I've never had one like it but I've read a lot about them."

Jase slipped the catch that opened the film cover, inspected the interior mechanism, closed the cover, and rotated the three lenses again, each time peering through the finder. Finally he wound the motor, depressed the exposure lever, and held the camera close to his ear. The motor ran as smoothly as a Swiss watch.

"You'll want a weatherproof carrying case," Marvin suggested.

"Definitely, and an extra shoulder strap for it. Cold weather can play the very dickens with leather, even when it's treated with waxed dressing. While I'm about it, I might as well pick up an extra strap for my own movie camera. I'll need snow filters too," Jase went on. "Even if they didn't modify the excessive blue you always find in winter scenes, they keep snow from blowing against the lenses and a filter's a darn sight easier to clean than a lens."

Marvin produced the filters, each in its individual plastic case, and extra straps.

Jase thought a minute.

"Film's just about the cheapest part of this whole business, and just about the biggest problem. I know I can't have too much, but I think I'll take about two thousand feet of color film and six hundred of black and white, with the fast emulsion on the black and white.

"Now I'd like to ask you something," Jase went on. "I expect to find everything from sleety rain to excessive cold. There'll be rivers to cross and certainly there'll be wet snow. Do you have anything that will protect the film?"

"We have a little gadget over here that should fill the bill."

He led Jase to another counter and showed him a rubberized container. Approximately half the size of a hot-water bottle, it had a top that could be opened fully and closed again with a waterproof expansion stopper. Inside the container was a waterproof pocket for warmth-creating chemical tablets, and a pack of six tablets came with each container. According to the folder accompanying them, the waterproof containers could be used to keep food hot or cold, to warm the hands, to thaw frostbite, to warm the feet when one crawled into his sleeping bag, and for a dozen other things. Jase discovered that each container would comfortably hold four cartons of film. That meant he could distribute the film throughout his load rather than carry it all in one parcel. To lose one would not mean to lose all.

“Now,” Jase said, “Dr. Goodell wants some still pictures for *Forests and Waters*. Let me have ten rolls of 35 mm. black and white and two color. Eight of the black and white should be medium speed and two fast.”

“I sure wish I could go with you,” Marvin sighed. “I’d like to unlimber my own movie camera on those Keewatin elk.”

“Are you a wildlife camera bug?” Jase asked.

“You might call it that. I spent all of last January up in the Digsells experimenting. I wanted some high, cold country and I found it. I also made several dozens blunders that I never should have made.”

“What were they?” Jase’s interest doubled. “My own movie making has been almost entirely in warm weather and I’d sure appreciate any tips.”

In the next half-hour Jase received a comprehensive rundown on cold-weather movies and the problems which required giving camera and film special attention. He learned that if a camera were first exposed to cold air and then to warm, moisture would certainly condense on the lens and no adequate pictures could be had until it evaporated. He learned that if he used his camera in cold weather, and then returned to camp, it would be better to leave the camera where the temperature would remain constant rather than carry it near a fire.

Had anyone ever told Jase that, in very cold weather, the lubricant applied to all movie cameras had a tendency to congeal and the moving parts to contract? This resulted in a slower speed, which in most instances could be compensated for if one first familiarized one’s self with the sound of the camera’s motor under normal conditions and at the customary sixteen frames a second. Then, when cold slowed the mechanism, advance the speed to thirty-two frames. If the camera sounded the same as it normally did when running sixteen frames, it would take satisfactory pictures.

Since it would be impossible to take effective pictures with a movie or any other camera while wearing mittens, Jase should have a pair of silk gloves to wear under his mittens. They wouldn’t keep his hands warm, but

they would prevent the burns and frostbite that all too often resulted when a warm finger touched cold metal. In cold weather, his film might become brittle and snap very easily. Rather than try to load cold film, he should carry as many spare rolls as he thought he might need in an inside pocket where body heat would keep them warm.

Jase could also keep his film warm by activating the heating tablets that were provided with the containers; a pinch of snow or a few drops of water would do it. There were also pocket-sized chemical heating pads to keep both hands and camera warm. One filling would keep them warm for about three hours, and they were good for six or seven fillings before they finally became useless. They should be placed on either side of the camera and held there with elastic bands, which were better than rubber because they were not so inclined to break when they became cold.

Jase bought an adequate supply of the chemical pads, some elastic bands to hold them on his camera, and a pair of silk gloves. Finally he bought a toboggan and a pair of snowshoes, also a bundle of lacing for extra snowshoe harness. Then he thanked Marvin Tracey for all his help, loaded the jeep, and drove fifty miles to a motel before calling it a day.

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The next morning, save for a single line of white clouds that scudded southward like a flock of sheep running to cover, the sky lacked even a hint of storm. But the north wind blew steadily, the temperature was below freezing, and the jeep lacked a top. Driving toward Taborville, not too fast, for the tired old jeep protested if asked to do over forty, Jase ducked a bit more deeply into the wool scarf around his neck and thought wistfully of a closed car with a heater. He'd even settle for a closed car without a heater, for the wind seemed to sail over the top of the jeep's windshield and whistle down inside with double force.

Only Buckles, who'd jumped from seat to floor and had his head and fore quarters under the recessed dash beneath the instrument panel, seemed reasonably comfortable. Jase glanced down at the dog enviously.

"Whoever said a dog was a dumb animal, Buckles? Wish you knew how to drive this contraption so I could stick my head under there. My face feels like a chunk of ice."

The jeep mounted a hill up which the wind had a clean sweep, and an unusually violent gust whipped at the toboggan and snapped one of the ropes that held it. Jase stopped almost instantly, thankful that the jeep had good tires and brakes, at least. He repaired the broken rope and wound another around the toboggan as an extra safety measure. That done, he walked around the jeep to inspect the rest of his load and found everything

in order. Resuming the journey, Jase passed the time by thinking back over the events that had led him here.

The son of a successful department store owner, Jase knew that his father would have liked him to join the family business. His older brother had, but Jase's loves had always been the out-of-doors and photography, and he hoped to combine them into a career as a recognized wildlife photographer. A summer on his own in the wilderness had brought him experience, friendship with Tom Rainse and Dr. Goodell, and a job with the state Conservation Department as official photographer for *Forests and Waters*. Now, with this newest assignment, he had the best chance yet to prove his abilities—if he didn't freeze before he got to Taborville.

"If you could only see your youngest son, Dad," Jase murmured to himself. "If you could see with your own eyes what he's doing when he might be sitting in a warm office telling other people what to do . . ."

He stopped briefly for lunch, again for gas, and finally swerved into the driveway of a motel as the dark shadows of an early winter twilight began to close in. He was happy, for he'd made better time than he thought he would; he couldn't be more than sixty miles from Taborville.

After supper at a neighboring cafe, he found himself still thinking of home. Jase pulled a chair up to the desk, found some motel stationery in the drawer, and sat down to write:

*Dear Family:*

*I was thinking of you as Buckles and I drove north. It's cold enough to freeze the ears on a tomcat, but this is a wonderful assignment! We're to follow the Keewatin elk to winter feeding grounds; wilderness all the way and it must be howling, anyhow it will be before we're through . . .*

Jase read what he'd written and nibbled the tip of his pen thoughtfully. His mother and father, even his brother, were strictly city people, the sort who appreciated a heated room far more than any outdoor adventure. What they knew about the wilderness they'd gleaned from movies and TV, and there was no point in worrying them.

Jase tore the letter up and started over again, mentioning only that he was on an assignment "near Taborville." He was well, happy, and grateful because he had been allowed to follow the career that was nearest his heart. He gave them news of Dr. Goodell, and of Tom Rainse, and concluded by saying that he would see them at Christmas. He wrote a second letter to Dr. Goodell saying that he had all his equipment, that he would reach Taborville tomorrow morning, and that, after stopping only long enough for provisions, he would go right into the Park and start work.

The second letter finished, Jase tumbled into bed and fell asleep immediately. At nine o'clock the next morning he was in Taborville.

Like most villages and small towns, Taborville was not without charm. But a somewhat desolate effect was imparted by the leafless trees and barren brown hills that rose on either side. There was no snow, but lifting his eyes to the mountains farther north, Jase saw white slopes on them. He looked around at the village again.

The buildings were small but neat, and blue wood smoke curled from almost every chimney. With only one main street, which wound for a considerable distance between the hills that flanked it on either side, Taborville gave an impression of being considerably larger than it was. Jase suspected that its entire population, about twenty-five hundred people, was busily preparing for the elk hunt, the final important event of the season.

No hunters were as yet in evidence, but numerous truckers were unloading equipment and supplies that hunters might demand. In contrast to the trucks, a herd of about thirty driven horses came trotting up the street. Jase knew they were about to be pressed into service as pack or saddle mounts—necessary where people had to go any distance from the highways and take with them the assortment of equipment that big game hunters required.

Jase drew up in front of a brick-fronted wooden building, considerably larger than the other stores along the street. Over the front entry hung a gilt-lettered sign on a black background:

JOHN HATCHER

## GEN. MERCHANDISE

Jase parked his jeep, ordered Buckles to guard it, and entered the store. He was greeted with the pleasant smells of coffee, smoked bacon and ham, spices, leather, cheese, and all the other odors he always associated with country stores.

There were half a dozen customers in the store, so Jase wandered about, looking at various items of merchandise until it was his turn to be waited on. Finally, at the meat counter, he was approached by a thin little clerk who wore thick bifocals for the apparent purpose of adornment. At any rate, he looked over rather than through them.

“Yours?” the clerk inquired.

“Six pounds of pork chops,” Jase told him, pointing through the glass-fronted counter. “Three of those steaks . . .”

Ordinarily he would have ordered carefully, and confined himself largely to salted meat and dried fruits and vegetables that, aside from offering a saving in both weight and bulk, withstood freezing far better than their fresh or canned counterparts. But Tom Rainse was meeting him in just over a week, and it would be time enough to go on Spartan fare when he must. Jase continued to order and the elderly clerk stacked his growing pile of purchases on the counter.

“Whar you headin’ fer?” the clerk asked.

“Up into Whitestone. Going to drive up and look around. Take some pictures.”

“Hm-m. Be gone long?”

“Not very. Why?”

“You stay long, you might not git back. Deep snow up there ’most any day now. Up in the mountains, she gets real deep. Yup, real deep.”

“Then I suppose the elk will be heading down soon.”

“I hear tell a few’s left the Park a’ready. Be good huntin’ this year; cold weather’s come early.”

Jase waited for the clerk to add up his purchases, paid him, and helped him stow the various parcels in cartons. Then he carried them out to his jeep. Of course they’d have to be repacked properly, but that could wait until he was ready to lash them on the toboggan and cover them with tarpaulins. The important thing was to get up into Whitestone and find the migrating elk before deep snow prevented his doing so.

As Jase drove on through Taborville, he noticed that everywhere packers and outfitters were busy. He remembered that it was illegal for a hunter even to venture into this area without a licensed guide, and that the law had come under fire as a device to provide the guides and outfitters with more money. Jase knew that such was not the case. An experienced woodsman might be as much at home in the Keewatin as he would in any other wilderness, but since most of the incoming hunters lived outside the district and couldn’t bring their own horses, if they killed any elk the most they could bring out was the trophy and they might have trouble with that. The head of a big bull elk was enough load for even a strong man, but horses could carry the head and the meat too. An even more important reason for the law hinged on the fact that many of the elk hunters were inexperienced, and needed to be watched over. There was no telling how many hunters’ lives the law had saved.

Safely out of town, Jase picked up speed. The road between Taborville and the southern boundary of Whitestone climbed almost three thousand feet in thirty-five miles, and the weather changed accordingly. A few miles out Jase encountered a dusting of snow that deepened as he gained altitude. The



bleak hills of Taborville here gave way to slopes heavily clothed with evergreens and aspens.

Near the Park's southern borders, paths, beaten by horses, led from the snowy road into the timber. Seeing them, Jase realized that some outfitters had already gone in to set up their tents and have them waiting for hunters. There were no permanent camps, such as were often found in deer and antelope country, because it was impractical to hunt anything the size of an elk from a stationary camp. A dead elk couldn't be dragged or carried as smaller game could and the hunters had to get back in to their game. The outfitters were setting up here, close to the Park, because many of the migrating elk followed known routes. The Taborville guides were acquainted with those routes, and, without trespassing on the Park in any way, posted their hunters just over the border. It was not the most sporting way to kill big game, but certainly it was one of the most practical. All the hunter had to do was wait near a trail until the elk came through.

When Jase came to it, the sign proclaiming that this was Whitestone National Park looked oddly forlorn. Even the log building where, during the tourist season, visitors bought postcards and souvenirs, had the bleak appearance of a building that had known no human occupant for some time.

Jase halted to consult his map.

Tom Rainse had said that the summer elk pastures were fifteen miles inside the Park's borders and to the north. Jase checked his speedometer and drove on. The snow continued to deepen as he climbed but gave him no trouble. Autumn wasn't late and the wind was brisk enough to satisfy the most ardent devotee of cold weather, but obviously the heavy snows hadn't started yet.

Exactly fifteen miles from the Park entrance, Jase halted and looked off to his left. He smiled ruefully.

The summer range of the Keewatin elk had appeared small enough on the map, and after hearing Tom Rainse talk Jase half expected to find elk running around like spring calves in new clover. But all he saw was a great meadow whose shriveled grasses thrust wanly through a six-inch blanket of snow. Still, the elk had to be somewhere in there.

Shifting into four-wheel drive, Jase drove across the meadow and among the clumps of evergreens that dotted it. Choosing a circuitous route, he drove through any aperture wide enough to let him pass. Winding about as he was, it was hard to judge distance, but he guessed he had come four miles from the highway when he finally encountered a rocky ledge eight or ten feet high. He and Buckles could climb it without difficulty, but even a jeep could not ascend a wall, and the ledge seemed to extend for a long ways in either direction.

Jase alighted and Buckles jumped out beside him. Jase watched the big Airedale roll happily in the snow.

“Elk or no elk,” he said, “I guess this is our official starting point.”

## chapter three

# *The Boundary*

Buckles bounced to a clump of grass and sniffed earnestly at a colony of field mice that lived beneath it. Snow flew as he started to dig, and though he could not penetrate the frozen earth into which the mouse burrow led, he continued to scrape at it with undiminished enthusiasm.

Jase grinned absently at the determined dog and gave himself to his own problem.

This summer range of the Keewatin elk embraced considerably more than the pin prick that appeared on maps. There were, it seemed to Jase, hundreds of square miles and even three thousand elk would not loom large in that much country. Before he could even start his project he must find the herd, or rather, one of the herds.

Tom had told him that elk did not move *en masse*, after the manner of caribou and buffalo. They'd be split into units that would range from solitary bulls to herds of fifty or sixty and perhaps more. It was certain that not all of them would start for the Taborville feeding grounds at the same time, nor would all be on the same path or moving at the same speed.

With a final defiant scrape of his claws, Buckles left the mouse's burrow and set off in search of game that didn't hide in a frozen fortress. Jase untied his toboggan, raised the jeep's seats, and took out and unfolded the tarpaulin he carried there. From a crevice in the loaded jeep, he retrieved several smaller squares of canvas, then pondered his packing problem.

Sleety rain was a distinct probability, but at this season all creeks and ponds would surely be frozen and therefore he needn't pack with those articles that would sink tied to something that wouldn't. He still wanted his load arranged so that, if necessary, he could take only part of it and still be fully equipped. As a starter, he divided his bread, meat, and vegetables into equal amounts and wrapped each in a square of canvas. The sugar, tea, and powdered milk were poured into cans—another standard item the jeep always carried—and each can was wrapped so that it would not chafe against anything.

The food packed, Jase carefully sorted the remaining articles. His first-aid kit, at least one day's supply of food, and toilet articles, would go into a knapsack to be carried on his shoulders. One pocket must be reserved for his 35 mm. still camera. Surplus film could be divided between pockets and

knapsack. Heating pads, light meter, and telephoto lens for his still camera fitted nicely into the carrying case, along with the turret-head, color-loaded movie camera that Marvin Tracey had furnished. His old movie camera, smaller and lighter, had its own case and presented no problem.

Buckles wandered back, and Jase was startled to discover that night was almost upon them. Hastily he gathered wood, built a fire, and he and Buckles feasted royally on a thick steak, canned potatoes and asparagus, bread and strawberry jam. Finished, Jase heaped wood on the fire and by its dancing light resumed work on his packing.

Though he didn't know what else lay ahead, Jase was certain that he was in for some rough travel. Experimenting with shapes and sizes, Jase arranged his various parcels and lashed them securely to the toboggan's struts. It was an ideal pack, with everything as it should be, until Jase remembered that he had left nothing out for breakfast. A little sheepishly he dug back into the load, got a box of pancake mix, a can of syrup, some dog meal for Buckles, and cut six slices of bacon. Then he spread his sleeping bag, crawled in, and fell instantly to sleep.

It was still dark when he awakened. The fire was dead and Jase's nostrils had that pinching sensation which is brought about only by below-average cold. But the rest of him was warm, and he was drifting back into slumber when Buckles, who had huddled throughout the night as near the sleeping bag as he could get, rose and thrust frost-rimed whiskers squarely into his master's face.

"Hey!" Jase sputtered.

Wholly awake now, he drew his left hand from the sleeping bag and discovered by the luminous dial on his wrist watch that it was half-past five. Jase crawled out and hurried into his wool coat and cap. At this time of year day was never early and seldom bright, but even though he couldn't see to travel, there was much to be done.

Shivering, Jase rebuilt his fire and cooked breakfast. With four chocolate bars in an inside pocket to serve as lunch, and an adequate supply of spare film in another inside pocket, he packed his sleeping bag, lashed the tarpaulin over the loaded toboggan, and tied his snowshoes to the tarp's fastenings. Deliberately he tipped the toboggan over, righted it, and felt the various parcels beneath the tarpaulin. Apparently nothing had shifted position and Jase sighed in relief. If the load would withstand upsetting, it should ride other hazards out safely.

Jase glanced at the sky, which was cloudless, then sifted snow into two of the heating pads and clamped them about his color camera. He wouldn't need black and white; today would offer ample light.

Finally he turned to his jeep, that would be here all winter and should be properly attended. Jase drained the radiator, jacked each of the wheels in turn and propped them with chunks of wood, then removed all four wheels and laid them in the jeep. He didn't know how much good that would do, for the heavy snow that the height of winter would bring here would cover the jeep completely. But at least it would do no harm.

Buckles, who had started out eagerly, then flattened his ears and waited in resignation, began to prance with impatience. He studiously avoided looking at his master and Jase grinned to himself. Buckles always wanted to go somewhere, always wanted Jase with him, and somehow had acquired the notion that, if he ignored the possibility of turning back by not looking at Jase, it would help matters along.

"All right, eager beaver," Jase told him. "Let's go."

Jase leaned his toboggan against the ledge, lifted the front end over the top, and with a mighty heave, sent it all the way. Shouldering his knapsack, he climbed up beside it and grasped the draw rope.

A toboggan was something he'd never used, and he'd have to let trial and error teach him the best way of using one. Remembering the steel-runner sleds of his boyhood, he decided at once that a toboggan was much harder to move. When he ascended a steep little pitch, the toboggan's drag increased fourfold and Jase suddenly remembered what he should have thought of in the first place. Marvin Tracey had given him a can of wax and told him to be sure to wax the toboggan before starting.

Patiently Jase unlashed the tarp, found his can of wax, and turned the toboggan over. The bottom side was scuffed, with chips and splinters missing here and there. Jase built another fire, warmed the can of wax, and used his bare hands to work it into the toboggan's sliding surface. It was slow work, for the wax must be worked as deeply as possible into the grain of the wood itself. Two hours had elapsed before Jase was ready to continue.

Now the toboggan moved with a tenth as much effort, and Jase put his mind to forming a definite plan of action.

He was east of the highway and the migration route of the elk would take them in a southerly direction. It would not be directly south for, as Tom Rainse had pointed out, they'd wander here and there and their wandering would be influenced by various factors. They might swerve for better browse, easier terrain, for storms, because something frightened them, or for any of a number of reasons. But if Jase continued to travel straight east, sooner or later he would be certain to cut one or more migration trails.

Jase had plodded due east for half an hour when Buckles bounced ahead toward a grove of scrubby aspens. The bristled Airedale had a cherished ambition; above anything else, he wanted to catch a chickaree. The fact that

he had missed no opportunity to try, and so far hadn't come even near success, in no wise dampened his interest in the hunt or his willingness to keep trying. Seeing a chickaree run from the far side of the aspens toward the pines, he tore happily after it but halted in mid-leap to snuffle something at his feet. Coming up beside him, Jase found the dog making a thorough examination of a fresh elk trail.

There could be no doubt about it; the trail was two to three feet wide, the snow and grass beaten to ground level. Jase guessed that eighteen to twenty elk had passed this way, and only hours ago. But Tom Rainse had told him that the elk migrated south, and the ones that had left this trail were heading almost due north!

Jase frowned, then checked the trail against his compass. The needle held perfectly, with no erratic movement to indicate a nearby ore or magnetic field that might conceivably throw it off. Jase looked toward the south, where the elk should be going, and to the north, where they were going, and tried to decide what to do. These were the first tracks he had seen, and his instructions were to start with the migration from summer pasture and keep on it. Maybe this trail would change course, or maybe it would lead him to other elk. Jase made up his mind.

"We're supposed to follow elk, Buckles," he told his dog, "and these sure aren't mosquitoes. Come on."

Three days later, Jase camped in the lee of a hog-backed ridge whose only growth consisted of a scattering of wispy and storm-battered aspens. Snow was being borne by the wind, and though it had started only twenty minutes ago, it had already added a veneer to the four inches of new snow that had fallen since Jase had turned north. As he sat beside his leaping fire, he reviewed the past three days.

Forty-five minutes after he had first taken the trail, the elk tracks had led him out of pine forest into aspens, of which an unusual number were stunted. He knew that the leaves, twigs and outer bark of aspens furnished a staple food for elk. Nearly all of those trees had been stunted, far more than they should have been, presumably by the browsing of hungry elk. The second day had been a repetition of the first. Today even the aspens had become scattered, with huge boulders and ledges of rock showing gaunt and gray above the snow in every direction. Twice, rather than pull his toboggan over such places, Jase had circled ground-level areas that the wind had swept clear of snow.

It was a starved land, forsaken and bleak. Aside from the tracks he'd started with—and the elk had been going somewhere in enough of a hurry so that Jase had not sighted them even once—there had been only a few deer tracks and scattered signs of foxes, marten, and rabbits. This place supported

almost no life. Yet Tom Rainse himself had directed Jase to this supposed summer range of the Keewatin elk. Jase tickled Buckles' ear and voiced his thought to the dog.

“Those elk were going north, and they're still heading north as though their tails were on fire. There must be an answer that I could find if I had time, but if I don't meet Tom on the border next Monday, he'll have the National Guard out looking for us. We're going back.”

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They started at dawn, and traveled so fast that they needed only two days to return to the spot where they'd picked up the trail of the northward-traveling elk. The next day, heading south, they came out of the hungry land back into game country. The stunted aspens gave way to great pines, groves of healthy aspens, and wide, park-like meadows, rich in grass. Shortly after midday Buckles found the first elk.

Traveling ahead, as was his usual habit, the big Airedale saw them from the shelter of a grove of pines. Buckles had only lofty contempt for these elk, which at best seemed to him clumsy, stupid beasts that did not furnish half the fun an alert dog could find in a chickaree. He did glance behind to see what Jase intended to do. Slipping through the pines, Jase saw what had attracted the dog's attention.

Sixteen cows and calves, led by a mighty bull with a magnificent rack of antlers, were slowly working their way through a grove of aspens, gnawing the tender outer bark as they did so. Rather than a prince royal of the wilderness, the antlered leader acted more like a farmyard bull as he chewed a mouthful of aspen bark as placidly, and as gustily, as if it had been hay. The cows and calves idled along as if they were returning to the barn from pasture.

Scarcely daring to breathe lest he frighten these, the first elk he had seen in Whitestone, Jase slipped his color camera and light meter from the case. He took a light reading, set the camera and shot six feet of film. It was not an impressive sequence, merely a herd of elk working through aspens, but Dr. Goodell had said that he wanted the entire migration and this might interest him. However, there was a chance of something better.

Keeping the camera to his eye, Jase advanced as slowly as possible, hoping that Buckles would do nothing to frighten the herd. Astonished because the elk didn't run, but not too astonished to film some satisfactory close-ups, Jase walked within fifty feet of the herd before the bull looked at him. As the big beast calmly went on gnawing aspen bark, the truth burst on Jase.

All summer long, during which time no human being had molested them in any way, these elk had lived in Whitestone National Park. As a

consequence, they had lost much of their fear of man. Sure now of what he was doing, Jase walked boldly forward and shot fifteen feet of what he knew would be extremely good movies of elk browsing in an aspen grove. The leaves were gone from the trees, letting the light fall softly on the yellow-brown backs, the whitish rump patches, and the deep chestnut-brown heads and chests, all of which contrasted warmly with the smooth olive-green trunks of the aspens.

Then Buckles burst upon the scene. With the Airedale yapping at their heels as though he couldn't decide which animal to pull down first, the elk fled.

It made little difference, because now tracks were everywhere, and every half-hour or so more elk were in sight. Jase filmed such as he wanted and traveled fast. There was little point in wasting film on constant sequences of elk that were doing nothing except make their placid way southward. Buckles, who liked anything that moved, soon grew tired of elk and made little side excursions here and there in search of more interesting game.

Jase camped that night in a grove of pines, awakened and breakfasted an hour before daylight, and was on his way. The sun was no more than a half-hour high when he heard a distant and at first unrecognized sound. It came again, from a different quarter, and this time he knew what it was: the report of rifles. He was near the border of the Park, and hunters on the other side of the border were taking their toll. Jase broke into a fast trot.

Suddenly some elk burst out of a stand of pines ahead of him. A herd of six, they faded from sight like so many yellow ghosts when he was at least two hundred and fifty yards away. Perplexed, Jase halted. He was still in the Park and the only other elk he'd seen were almost tame. These were wild, and Jase suddenly realized the reason.

These, too, were Park elk whose long summer immunity from harm at the hands of man had made them trusting. But after they crossed the border, and were met by rifle fire, the survivors learned all over again that the innocent-appearing humans who swarmed over Whitestone while summer reigned, were, in the fall, a deadly menace.

Jase could get no pictures. But he was sure Dr. Goodell would be interested in the fact that, after being shot at across the border, the elk had re-entered the park.

He called the Airedale to him. "Heel, Buckles!" he ordered. "You hear those rifles? I'm wearing a red hunting coat, but you aren't. You don't look like an elk, but some of those hunters may be excited by anything brown that moves, so you stick close to me."

As Jase continued southward, rifles cracked sporadically and far more clearly. Now he saw numerous frightened elk, ranging from a great bull to a



herd of twenty cows and calves, that wanted to cross the border but dared not. Were it not for the hunters who lay in ambush, the last stage of the migration would be well under way.

Jase grew thoughtful, remembering what he had read and heard about the strange workings of the balance of nature. In primitive times, North America had been one vast game refuge, with millions of buffalo, antelope, elk, deer, moose, bears, and all kinds of small game. To control these vast numbers, nature had installed her own checks and balances in the form of wolf packs, mountain lions, foxes, and other predators that lived on the teeming game. The strong and healthy grass-eaters had survived and the meat-hungry prowlers had pounced on the old and sick. Should any species over-browse its range, some were sure to become weak and sick and predators flourished. When the numbers of the threatened species were down to normal levels, the healthy, well-fed survivors could fight off the predators, who in turn declined as their weaker members died off. The system had worked as beautifully as the camera on Jase's shoulder.

Then came the white man's complete conquest of the continent and his bitter wars with both the wild men and the wild creatures that had held sway before him. Common sense halted his destruction of most, but not all, harmless species of wildlife while there was still time. But predators, that turned to the white man's flocks and herds when their own natural food became scarce, were shown no mercy. In addition, most of the grazing land that had once been the exclusive domain of wild creatures, was taken over for the white man's uses. As a result, if they were not held in check by some means, some species would multiply to such an extent that they would eat up their own range and begin to starve to death. The Keewatin elk were only one example.

In the modern world, hunters were considered the best means to keep expanding herds in check. But the hunters who waited at the Whitestone border and drove the elk back, were defeating this purpose of harvesting surplus animals by jeopardizing the chances of those who hunted farther to the south. Jase wondered what would be done about it. Right now, he didn't know. Anyway, his job was to take pictures. If he did his job as he should, maybe his pictures would help solve the problem.

Hearing an especially loud blast of rifle fire, that seemed very near, Jase swerved toward it and found two hunters and their guides gloating over a nice pair of bulls that lay dead in the snow. Leading back into the Park was a trail made by several elk that apparently had fled when the shots were fired; they must have been accompanying the two bulls.

Buckles stalked stiffly up, sniffed at the elk, and returned. Jase halted long enough to record the scene on film, sheathed his camera, and strode

forward.

The two hunters, who didn't look like anything other than successful business men in spite of their hunting clothes, stood talking to each other about their prizes, too excited even to notice Jase. The guides, going about the task of dressing the two elk with a skill born of long experience, did not look up.

"Nice pair of bulls," Jase remarked.

"Yeah," one of the guides grunted.

Pulling his toboggan, Buckles beside him, Jase went on. He had an increasingly strong feeling that the Park border, and the hunters who waylaid elk along it, could provide at least part of the answer Dr. Goodell needed. Jase decided to linger until he had more comprehensive evidence down on film. Twenty minutes later Buckles warned him of the next stand, which consisted of only two men.

They were a wizened little Taborville guide and his hunter, both of whom sat on the trunk of a fallen tree from which they had brushed the snow. Wind and weather had sketched their own designs on the little guide's face, but neither the elements nor the years had stolen the sparkle or the humor from his clear blue eyes. As Jase came up he was talking softly to the hunter, but turned while Jase was still twenty yards away and said affably, "Howdy."

"Hi," Jase replied.

"Huntin'?"

"Taking pictures. That's my kind of hunting."

The guide gave him a toothless smile. "You must want pictures a heap more'n most folks."

"I'm a State man and I'm supposed to be recording this migration on movie film—part of it, anyway."

The hunter looked at Jase with friendly interest, while the little guide slapped his knee enthusiastically.

"By gum! That's a good idee! Those swivel-chair boys find out how things are, could be they'll make some sensible rules!"

Jase warmed to this amiable little man who didn't seem to care whether or not strangers came to his stand. He dusted more snow off the log and seated himself, Buckles squatting beside him.

"Seen anything?" Jase inquired.

"Let two bunches, one of six and one of nine, go by," the guide stated. "One middlin' good bull but we want a big'un."

Jase nodded toward the east. "I've been hearing lots of shooting down that way."

“Not all Whitestone elk though,” the guide observed. “There’s a herd summers ’twixt here and Taborville, and the boys are gettin’ into ’em.”

“Do they winter at the Taborville feeding grounds, too?” Jase asked, wondering if Tom Rainse knew about this herd.

“Yeah, thereabouts.”

Jase filed this away in his store of information. A herd of elk that summered outside the Park, but wintered at Taborville, meant still more that disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

“There seem to be plenty of elk along the border,” Jase said.

“There are, this year,” the little guide agreed. “Mebbe half the Whitestone herd’s started. Rest’ll come later. Other years, you can’t hardly get a shot.”

Jase thought curiously that, aside from continuing to speak in low tones, the little guide was not making the slightest effort to exercise that stealth which is supposed to be a trait of all good hunters. Then Jase remembered that these elk, accustomed to throngs of summer tourists and never harmed by them, lost much of their natural fear—at least, until they were shot at.

“Do you mind if I take pictures of the next bunch that comes along?” Jase asked.

The guide looked at the hunter, who nodded.

“Help yourself. I wish, though, that you’d tie your dog.”

To his intense disgust, Buckles had a rope slipped through his collar and found himself tied to a sapling behind the log. A few minutes later the little guide stiffened like a pointing dog that gets a sudden scent of game and looked intently northward. Following his gaze, Jase saw a motion among the trees.

About four hundred yards away, the motion first appeared to be mottled patches of brown with no distinct form or outline. But the patches couldn’t be anything except another herd of elk on their way to the Taborville feeding grounds. As the hunter rose slowly from the log, Jase took a light reading, set his color camera accordingly, and stepped far enough back so that, should there be shooting, both hunter and elk would be in his view finder.

In no hurry at all, the elk took five minutes to advance another hundred yards. They disappeared in a little swale near the Park boundary and lingered there. Then they came on and Jase had his first clear view of one of the herd.

It was a big cow that appeared around a tree, halted, looked back over her shoulder, and came on. Next was another cow, then two calves, but the fifth member of the procession was a regal bull with mighty, branching antlers. His hand on the exposure lever, but not yet depressing it, Jase waited breathlessly.

The hunter's rifle was at his shoulder and he was squinting over the sights, but he waited until the herd came even nearer before he squeezed the trigger. Finally the rifle cracked, and Jase started his camera at the sound, in time to record a perfect neck shot. The big bull went down where he stood and did not move again. The rest of the herd whirled, raced back toward the Park, and Jase continued to shoot as long as any were in sight.

When he finally lowered his camera, it was with a happy feeling that he had taken the first genuinely constructive step in filming useful evidence. It was not for him to say whether hunters should be permitted to shoot elk as they emerged from the Park, but no argument could possibly demonstrate with half the force of these pictures what happened when hunters *did* shoot there.

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Fifteen minutes after they left the happy hunter and his little guide Buckles strained forward and his stiff, stubby tail indicated something up ahead. Jase glanced up in time to see a single figure step behind a tree, so that it was almost hidden.

"Make tracks and make 'em fast," a voice snarled. "Don't want no fool furriners messin' this stand up!"

"Now wait a minute." Jase's cheeks flushed and he felt prickles of anger crawling up his spine. "This is public property, isn't it?"

"Ain't tellin' ya ag'in! One step closer and ya gits a slug through the belly!"

Then the figure stepped from behind the tree and Jase saw the grinning face of Tom Rainse.

## chapter four

# *Jase's Theory*

They were stretched on the narrow cots in Tom's "camp," a pickup truck whose body bore an ingenious, insulated cover that excluded cold, wind, and weather. The interior was compactly arranged, with a gasoline stove, a cupboard for food and dishes, and even a portable sink. The exterior, naturally, flaunted a neatly painted sign, UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, that some wag in the department had lettered on the side of Tom Rainse's mobile home.

Buckles was sprawled on the floor between them, happy to be where it was warm instead of snuggling as close to Jase's sleeping bag as he could get. Like the two men, the Airedale was relaxed, comfortable, and a little too full of food.

Jase yawned in the darkness, genuinely tired and glad to rest, even feeling a certain peace of mind simply because night had come. As long as daylight had lasted he had patrolled the border with Tom Rainse, and had had more than his fill of dead or dying elk. It had not been a pleasant sight to see so much bloodshed, and Jase now felt grateful simply because night would bring peace to the harassed elk. As long as darkness held, the southbound migrants could cross the border without meeting the deadly ambushes that awaited them in daylight.

Tom's cot creaked as he propped himself on one elbow. "Well, Nature Boy, if you've come up with any bright ideas, now is the time to spill 'em."

"I don't know how bright they are," Jase answered, "but I've got a few, and one of them is about this waylaying elk at the Park border."

"Unload your problem, my boy. What about it?"

"I don't like it. When those elk come across the border, after spending the summer in Whitestone where nobody harms them, they're almost as trusting as so many cattle. To wait in ambush and knock one over seems about as sporting as walking out and shooting a bull in a barnyard."

"Um-hum," Tom said soothingly. "Just what would you like to have done about it?"

"I'd like to see it stopped!"

Tom became serious. "Think what you're saying, Jase. Sure, we could stop the shooting at the border if we felt like it; if we wanted to we could close all open hunting country clear to Taborville. But the elk would still

have to meet the hunters some time, and the poor critters would be just as trusting wherever they met 'em."

"I suppose so, but—doggonit! It just doesn't seem right!"

"But it is right," Tom said firmly. "It's right if only for the sake of the elk themselves. The herd must be cropped; you know what will happen if it isn't. With almost no natural enemies left, the herd gets bigger and bigger, over-grazes its range—"

"That's true, but it's not the point. I'm talking about sportsmanship."

"Oh, I know the picture you have in mind; the fearless hunter faring forth to match wits with the monarch of the forest and, after a proper hunt where the odds favor the elk, the hunter finally wins. It's a good picture, and probably most guides in Taborville would fit it pretty well. Now let me ask you a question; how many of the hunters you saw up there today could do it?"

Jase summoned a mental image of the hunters he'd seen on the border: business and professional men, executives, skilled workmen. He tried to imagine any one of them matching wits with a wily bull elk and finally bringing it down, but his imagination wasn't good enough. He saw something else clearly, though. The guides and outfitters of Taborville could live partly because men such as these wanted to go elk hunting and would pay for the privilege. So the state that sold the permits and used the money in more conservation work, the guides, the hunters, and even the elk, were better off because the hunt occurred as it did.

"I see what you mean," he admitted finally.

"I thought you would. Now let me ask you another question. Did you see a single hunter today who'd killed an elk, and who looked as though he'd shot a bull in a barnyard?"

Jase thought of the exultant faces of hunters who'd bagged their trophies, and his answer had to be no.

"See my point?" Tom went on. "*In his own mind* every man jack up there who's worked at whatever he works at for fifty-one weeks, and stolen the fifty-second to go elk hunting, is dressed in buckskins. He's matched wits with the mighty elk. He's proved himself. Son, this isn't two hundred years ago, or even a hundred. If it was possible to go back to those times, I'd bet a new penny against a pail of mud that many a mighty hunter sat at a salt lick or on a trail and waited for his game to come to him. I don't say there were no great hunters because there were, and there are some today. But this *is* today. We must see things as they are, not as we maybe wish they might be."

Jase said meekly, "I guess you're right. And this was the first day. The hunting must get harder later in the season."

“Of course it does. You saw how spooky the elk were that panicked back toward the Park. They’ll be just as spooky when they come over the border again, as a lot of them will tonight. Toward the end of the season it will take a crackerjack guide just to get his man within shooting distance of an elk.”

Jase lay silently and after a moment Tom went on, “Mind you, the best solution would be a flexible hunting season or, even better, to allow limited hunting in the Park, which would end this business of making the border an outdoor shooting gallery when the season opens. Changing the law takes time, and first we need some proof that it should be changed. So tell me what you did and saw in Whitestone.”

“I did exactly as you told me,” Jase said. “After entering the Park I drove fifteen miles, then left the road and cut across the meadows. I drove four or five miles and came to a rock ledge the jeep couldn’t climb. The ledge seemed to extend for a long distance in both directions, so I left the jeep—”

“Wait a minute!” Tom interrupted. “That sounds like Parry’s Ledge. What direction did you take when you left the road?”

“I had to wind around a lot, to avoid thickets and such, but I hit generally north.”

“*North!* Then it *was* Parry’s Ledge. What did you go north for, when the migration was headed south?”

“I wanted to catch the whole migration, by starting with the elk farthest from the border, and working my way down through the different herds.”

“But you were already at the northern edge of the range when you left the road. I thought you’d naturally head south from there. But go on.”

“Well, I figured that, if I headed due east after I left the jeep, I’d be certain to cut elk trails and then all I’d have to do was follow ’em. I did hit one trail, maybe twenty or so elk, but they were headed due north. It was the only trail I’d seen, so I stayed on it for three days. Then, knowing I had to meet you, I left it and hiked back south as fast as I could.”

“What’s the point? Twenty or so elk can’t tell direction and head north instead of south. That’s their tough luck.”

Jase was silent a moment, thinking. If he had been north of the elk’s summer range up there in Whitestone, then the small herd whose trail he had followed must have been stragglers. But occasional stragglers wouldn’t account for all those gnawed and stunted aspens he had seen. Suppose—he sat up so quickly he nearly overturned his cot.

“Tom, suppose three thousand elk do cross the border. Is there any chance of mislaying eleven hundred of them between here and Taborville?”

“Not likely; this area is too well patrolled. My guess is that something happens to them before they cross the border. But you came down with the migration, and didn’t see anything that might give us a lead.”

“When and where is the Park census taken?”

“On summer pastures in late spring. Depends on when the roads are open.”

“And three thousand elk are known to be in that area in late spring or early summer?”

“About that many last year. Fewer this year.”

Jase’s excitement mounted. “Then I could be right!”

“About what?”

“Look, there are three thousand elk in the pastures up there in early summer, just the time when grasses and shrubs furnish most forage. But what happens as the season advances and the forage is scarcer? Wouldn’t the elk scatter? Wouldn’t some, maybe even half, find themselves in that part to the north, where I was? It’s pretty barren, but I know a lot of elk have been through it because the aspens are all gnawed and stunted.

“Maybe elk wouldn’t stay there, but the aspens would furnish food while they’re traveling through. When they reach new and better pastures, it stands to reason that they’d stay there, that they’d never travel back through that barren country just to get on the standard route to the winter feeding grounds. The reason a thousand or more elk never show up at Taborville is that they never go there. They winter somewhere else!”

Tom’s answering snort sounded half surprised, half annoyed. “First you go the wrong way, which I have to figure out, then you bump into a lot of elk-chewed aspens, but don’t tell me until now!”

“You think there’s something in my idea?”

“Could well be. At any rate, it’s worth investigating. Trouble is, I can’t go; I’m stuck here through elk season. It’s really a job for the Park rangers, anyway, but by the time we get through state and federal red tape it’ll be spring.”

“Let me do it! It’s my idea, and I’m supposed to be filming elk migration, remember?”

“There’s too much country up there to roam around in alone, Jase. All right in the summer, but it’s mighty deserted now, with the Park closed.”

“I’ve already made one trip, haven’t I? I’ve got the right equipment, and you can supply all the grub I’ll need.”

“That part’s all right, but nobody’ll know just where you are or how long—ha! Have you noticed a plane while you’ve been wandering around?”

“Yes. There’s been one in the morning and one in late afternoon.”

“It’s the same plane,” Tom told him. “The pilot, Pete Johnson, flies north for Mountain Airways in the morning and comes back in the afternoon. I’ll get word to him that every other day, morning or afternoon, you’ll build a smoky fire, to let him know where you are and that you’re all right. If he



doesn't spot your fire he'll report trouble. Likewise, if you *are* in trouble, light two smoky fires. Got it?"

"I've got it!"

Early the next morning, with chains on the pick-up's wheels, they bucked the snows of Whitestone and halted at a point which Jase thought approximately opposite the place where he'd left the trail of the northbound elk. Their toboggan loaded with nearly all of Tom's grub supply, Jase and Buckles headed once more into the wilderness.

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The wind freshened and snow fell faster. Axe in hand, Buckles beside him, Jase set out to gather enough wood for his supper fire. He wouldn't need to keep it going all night; the sleeping bag kept him warm regardless of the outside temperature and Buckles had long since learned how to burrow in the snow.

The snow was falling very fast now, but despite the wind and cold it was soft, feathery stuff, the sort that usually comes only with fairly warm and windless winter days. Watching it, Jase grimaced. He had snowshoes and a toboggan that was made to ride over deep snow. But even snowshoes sank deeply into soft new snow and pulling the toboggan tomorrow would be work more fitted to a horse than a man. However, tomorrow hadn't come yet.

Jase built his fire, cooked a meal, spread his sleeping bag in the lee of a great boulder, and let sleep steal his worries. With daybreak, he was again on the way.

Leaving fourteen inches of fluffy new fall on the ground, the storm had stopped and the wind had lulled. But an ominous bridge of clouds held threat of more snow on the way, and bone-penetrating cold had hung every bush and tree with a rime of frost. However, action was an antidote for a plunging thermometer.

Jase's snowshoes sank halfway through the new snow, and had to be lifted out with every step. Pushing little wavelets of snow to either side, the toboggan plowed its own furrow and must be pulled with both hands rather than one. Jase bent his head and plodded on. For a while Buckles plunged along beside him. But never one to do things the hard way when an easy one offered, Buckles presently dropped back to walk in the path broken by the toboggan.

When the first hour ended and again when the second one passed, Jase halted to look around. Each time, or so it seemed, he was within a pebble's toss of last night's camp. He was traveling slowly, for under these circumstances it was impossible to go fast, but he knew he was doing better than it appeared. There was almost no change in the terrain, but it did not

necessarily follow that the big boulder which met his eyes each time he turned was the one beside which he'd camped. There were a great many such boulders and they all looked alike.

Jase resorted to an old trick, one that had often proven effective when he was involved in some monotonous task and wanted time to pass swiftly. Looking neither to the right nor the left, and letting his eyes stray only far enough ahead to see where he was going, he tried to close his mind to everything except moving the toboggan as fast as possible. It was difficult, for curiosity insisted on intruding and three times he had forcibly to resist an urge to look at his watch.

When he finally stopped to rest, Jase raised his head to look about him.

The trick of concentration had worked again. The sparse land of brambles and runty aspen was almost at an end, and towering pines, that had never seemed more welcome or friendly, were again ahead. Jase sighed in relief, then snapped to attention.

He thought he saw motion within the pines, and fastened his gaze on the place where it had been. He saw it again. Presently, led by a big bull, fifteen elk emerged from the pines, walked leisurely along beside them, and disappeared down a partly wooded draw. The sight made Jase forget his weariness and his aching muscles.

"We were right!" he told Buckles exultantly. "We were right!"

Unimpressed by elk but happy because Jase was, Buckles wagged an amiable tail and plowed through the snow to his master's side. Absently scratching the Airedale's ears, Jase looked again at the pines. Seeing fifteen elk didn't necessarily imply that there were some fifteen hundred others, but it was an encouraging sign, and these might well be part of the missing herd. As he went on toward the pines, the toboggan had unaccountably become much lighter and his snowshoes seemed to lift themselves.

The snow beneath the pines was trampled flat by elk, far more than the little herd Jase had seen. Since fresh snow had fallen within the past twenty-four hours, it stood to reason that the tracks were fresh. Eyes to the ground, Jase walked slowly into the pine forest. Elk tracks were everywhere, and twice little bands of elk flushed from his near approach. Beyond any question this was part of the missing herd. It was on the move all right, but these elk seemed to be making their way into a series of draws and canyons that lay to the east. Beyond was a range of craggy mountains.

Jase didn't understand it. Goats and sometimes sheep wintered on the rocky, windswept heights, but certainly elk did not. This was all wrong. Then Jase grinned at his own deductions. Theoretically the elk should be moving south, but obviously nobody had explained theory to the elk and they were traveling east. The way to find out why was to follow them.

A chickaree flitted up a tree trunk and Buckles bounced happily forward. As he reared hopefully against the tree, Jase drew his color camera from its case. He squinted through the finder and was about to depress the exposure lever when Buckles dropped to the ground so hastily that he almost fell backward.

From behind the tree, and hitherto concealed by underbrush, a bull elk rose unsteadily to its feet. The bull's symmetrical antlers were those of an animal in its prime, but its right rear leg was drawn close to the belly and it balanced precariously on three legs.

Jase followed with his camera as the bull hobbled off, and kept shooting until it disappeared. Badly hurt, probably in a battle with another bull, the elk could manage no faster gait than a shambling run. Jase lowered his camera, feeling full of pity as he caught up the toboggan's draw rope and continued eastward. The crippled bull couldn't possibly survive the winter and was almost certainly doomed to a lingering and painful death. It would be a kindness to kill it, but firearms were prohibited in the Park, and Jase hadn't brought even a pistol.

Presently the east-dipping canyon he was following widened out, and Jase saw that so many elk had preceded him down it that the snow was beaten into a series of hard-packed highways. Grateful for the respite, Jase removed his snowshoes and tied them on the toboggan. Downslope, on a packed trail, the toboggan moved with almost no effort and Jase devoted his attention to trying to estimate the number of elk that had gone down ahead of him.

They were obviously not banded into a single big herd but a series of small ones, for every hundred feet or so were additional trails where a bunch of elk had come out of the forest into the shallow canyon. Evidently it was a natural highway, the easiest path from the snow-threatened uplands, and the eastward movement of elk began to make sense in Jase's mind.

He stopped to consult his map. The canyon could lead nowhere but to the Mary River, that had its source in a glacier to the north but was fed by so many tributaries that it soon became a full-fledged river. Flowing south and then east, the Mary made its way through steep-sided Hell's Gap before again broadening out into a long wilderness valley.

As Jase traced the course of the river it seemed to him that the Taborville feeding grounds should be the logical destination for these elk too, except that they chose a different way to get there. They could follow the valley of the Mary to the eastward bend, then swing back into the hills . . .

The only trouble was that everyone said these elk never reached the Taborville grounds. Still, his analysis of the migration of this section of the Keewatin elk became much more credible. They lingered in their high

pastures until deepening snow forced them to leave, then took the easiest, nearest way out—eastward.

Jase saw the crippled bull again, hobbling painfully ahead. He flicked the telephoto on his turret-head camera into place, steadied the camera against a tree, and shot fifteen feet of film. As he finished, the hum of a distant plane reminded Jase that night was coming. The plane dipped low as Tom Rainse's pilot friend brought it in over Whitestone on his southward flight. Jase had sent Pete Johnson his one-fire, all's-well signal the day before, so now he waved, even though he knew the pilot couldn't see him.

But the pilot could see two smoky fires should Jase find it necessary to build them; that was comforting to know. Jase wished he also had some way to give the pilot a message that the missing elk had been found.

## chapter five

# *Natural Hazards*

In Buckles' opinion, the most exciting and important moment of all was the one immediately at hand. Next came the moment to follow. Except when asleep, little of Buckles' life was without involvement in a gay and exciting adventure or an immediate prospect of one. He escaped most of the worries and troubles with which humans are constantly beset, but he did have a few anxieties. The foremost among these had to do with staying put, which he detested. Fortunately camping expeditions meant being on the move most of the time, which suited Buckles fine. It was all right when they stopped for the night, but he always knew when they were supposed to move on. The ideal time to start moving, according to Buckles, was at least an hour and a half before daylight.

Experience had taught him how to live in cold weather. Should snow be falling when it was time to go to bed, he merely lay down and let it cover him. If there was no storm, he scraped a hole in snow already on the ground, crawled in, curled up, and with snow to insulate him on all sides, slept warmly.

This morning he crept out of his snow burrow, stretched, yawned, tested the four winds with his nose, and padded over to where Jase still slept soundly in his sleeping bag. Buckles sniffed his master, tapped him with a gentle paw, and stood hopefully back to await a response. When none was forthcoming Buckles enthusiastically fell to licking such portions of Jase's face as were not covered by the sleeping bag's hood. A very large, very wet, sticky tongue awakened Jase, sputtering.

"Wh . . . Wh . . . What the devil! Buckles!"

Buckles' tail, scarcely long enough to make a good handle, wagged furiously back and forth. The day was wasting; surely it was high time to be on the move. Only sluggards lay abed when the onrushing hours offered so much. Jase groaned, then crawled out of the sleeping bag, shivered into his red coat, donned his red wool cap, and laced his pacs.

"A dog with ambition!" he complained. "That's what I got!"

When he rose and moved about, biting cold drove the final sleep fogs from his brain. With their passing his own enthusiasm mounted. He was on the trail—at least on one of the main trails—of the second half of the

Keewatin elk. He had only to stay on it in order to solve the mystery surrounding those that never appeared at Taborville.

The thought elated him, for if reasonable luck remained on his side, it would mean one more conservation problem solved, or at least in a position to be solved. Also, if the documentary he presented to Dr. Goodell was good, he would have advanced one more step toward his cherished goal of becoming an authoritative wildlife photographer.

Jase built a fire from wood gathered the previous evening. Since the supplies that may be packed on a toboggan are not limitless, breakfast consisted of the flapjacks and strong tea that had been Jase's morning fare since leaving Taborville. However, a good camp cook is always ingenious, and Jase stirred a handful of raisins into the batter. Tomorrow he might use shredded dried peaches, the next day, cinnamon. He'd even tried breaking one of his chocolate bars into bits and cooking them with his flapjacks. The result had been very palatable, but Jase hesitated to use more chocolate bars in the same manner because he needed them for lunches. Jase ate his raisin flapjacks, tossed a couple to Buckles, lifted a cup of scalding tea to his lips, and stared into the thinning darkness.

Not only was there no hurry about getting under way but there would be no point in starting before there was light enough to take pictures. His next important sequence might be ten miles farther on, or it might be within easy camera range of where he was now sitting. Wherever it was, Jase wanted it.

He drank the rest of the tea, packed his toboggan, and leaned back to rest his head against the tarp with which the load was covered. He studied the pale, cold stars that were spread like a field of frozen flowers across the winter sky and tried to pick out the ones he knew. But he was too busy thinking about elk to concentrate on astronomy, and as soon as the winter dawn crept reluctantly up the sky he sat up to take a reading with his light meter.

The meter's needle barely flickered; certainly there was not enough light for color, though his fast black and white film should record. Jase took his own, cheaper camera from its case, adjusted the lens to its widest aperture, and waited. Presently he shot a sequence of four elk hurrying down the shallow canyon. Five minutes later a single bull ambled by, so old that his muzzle was hoary, and Jase recorded that. In the following hour, there was no activity at all, except Buckles' impatience. Jase took another light reading and discovered that his color film would function.

He rose, changed cameras, picked up the toboggan's draw rope, and started down the floor of the canyon. For the first hour he saw no elk, but he was not surprised. He was sure that not all the migrants were ahead of him, but hundreds were. There was no way of telling how many elk had already

preceded him, but so many cloven hoofs had pounded the snow that it was literally a packed highway. Though browse was available, it seemed to Jase that comparatively few of the migrating elk had stopped to feed. They seemed to have been urged on by something behind them, perhaps something they feared. Since all these elk had spent the summer in Whitestone, where humans were both common and harmless, Jase could not believe that they were running from him. Probably they were fleeing through some inner instinct that snow would soon blanket their upland pastures.

The farther down the canyon Jase went, the deeper it became. Presently the tracks of the migrating elk left the canyon's floor, which they had followed all the way from the summit, and struck down a natural bench on the north side. Already the difference between the summit and this much lower altitude was evident, for here the snow was only half the depth that Jase had found on top. At mid-morning Jase had his first look at the Mary River.

Varying from perhaps a half to three-quarters of a mile between abutments of sheer stone that hemmed it in on either side, the valley of the Mary was not wide as river valleys go. But to Jase it seemed marvellously rich, even though there were comparatively few trees, save for the willows bordering the Mary itself. Probably the soil was uncongenial to trees. Or perhaps migrating elk, always fond of succulent young shoots, cropped them before they had a chance to grow.

Despite the lack of trees, the whole valley of the Mary, or as much of it as he could see, was carpeted with rich grass. It grew so thickly that it almost hid the underlying snow. Probably the lush growth could be explained by the sheltered valley, a constant supply of water, and the fact that a snow-fed river like the Mary would overflow its banks periodically and deposit a new supply of rich soil as the waters receded. Most of the side canyons down which the Mary's tributaries flowed presumably offered similar lush pasturage, although, from where he stood on the high bench, Jase could see only into the valley of the Mary itself.

From the point where the canyon opened into the valley to as far down it as he could trust his eyes, he counted sixty-three bunches of elk busily filling their paunches. Here was the answer to the puzzle of why these elk traveled as they did. Setting out on their southward trek, these elk first came east to the valley of the Mary, where there was forage in abundance, rather than take the direct route which offered so little food.

Now that they were safely out of the heights, the elk seemed to be in no hurry at all. Here in the Mary's valley was plenty of food. From now on they'd travel slowly, eating as they went. But rich though the forage was, it

was necessarily limited by the area of the valley. The tail end of this migration might find scant pickings, but there would be enough, and by the time the stragglers reached the Mary's eastward swing, they'd be so near the Taborville feeding grounds that lack of forage would be no serious problem.

Why didn't they get to Taborville, then? There was nowhere else they could go. Did something happen to them on their travels through the valley of the Mary? Or was it farther on? Did nothing at all happen? Might it be that this herd had some secret wintering ground, as yet undiscovered? Jase took the map from his pocket, scanned it for possible clues, and turned to Buckles.

"It doesn't tell me a blasted thing," he informed the dog, "except that we must be darn near out of the Park."

Jase filmed the scene in a long, panoramic color shot, then slipped the movie camera in its case and took a few still pictures with his 35 mm. camera. About to go on, he stopped in his tracks when Buckles snarled fiercely. Ruff erect and teeth bared, the Airedale was standing on the edge of the bench down which they had been traveling, peering into the canyon. Jase followed the dog's gaze to the canyon's brush-grown floor.

As Jase watched, a bull elk broke from the brush and ran a little way up the slope toward him. It could be none save the crippled bull he had seen yesterday, for the same rear hoof was drawn up to its paunch and its best speed was an unsteady run. Behind it, maintaining the pace at an easy lope, ran five big timber wolves!

His hands trembling with excitement, Jase slipped the color camera from its case, made sure the telephoto lens was still in place, and checked the light reading. Then he raised the camera to his eye and deliberately forced himself to be calm.

He was not afraid of the wolves, for he knew they would not attack a man in broad daylight unless they were starving, and these were all sleek and well fed. Besides, he didn't think they had even seen him, so intent were they on the crippled bull. But he had to be steady, for the dramatic wilderness scene before him was a rare photographic opportunity that would probably never come again. Moreover, a good sequence of the scene would add greatly to his documentary film.

The injured bull floundered on toward Jase until, through the telephoto lens, it appeared to be only a few feet away. Three of the wolves were closing in on either side now, forcing the elk to make a stand and defend itself.

Suddenly the bull turned, lowered its head, and lurched at the nearest wolf. With only three good legs to back it, the elk's lunge was clumsy, and the wolf merely swerved to one side. As it did so, its two nearest



companions rushed in, then retreated again as the bull made a vicious sweep at them with its sharp-tined antlers.

Now that the elk had made a stand, the wolves were in no hurry. All five of them spread out in a semi-circle, facing up-slope toward the bull. Jase wondered fleetingly why timber wolves, the wariest of beasts, would crouch so unconcernedly there in the snow, for by now they must be aware of him and Buckles. Then he remembered that he was still in Whitestone, where even wolves were protected.

Jase shot the scene, glanced at the footage indicator, and hoped that the forty-three feet of film remaining on the spool would be enough. Just in case it wasn't, he set the other camera according to light conditions and noted with gratification that he had thirty-seven feet of black and white film in that one.

Squinting back through the finder of the color camera, Jase kept his finger on the exposure lever and unwavering eyes on the embattled bull. For what seemed a long time, the wolves maintained their semi-circle, as though they were merely curious.

Then the two on either flank rose as though by prearranged signal and trotted forward. The wolf on the right feinted. The bull whirled to meet him. As it did, the second wolf rushed in to launch a flank attack. Before it could strike, the bull pivoted to repel this new threat. The second wolf leaped away, and both wolves rejoined the watchers in the snow.

For what Jase considered another interminable interval, they merely waited. Then the second wolf from the right rose and padded forward, beyond the elk. When the bull turned far enough to keep the wolf under observation, the rest of the pack launched a furious, concerted attack. They came on as though their purpose was to overwhelm their victim by sheer force and drag it down. But though they seemed to be recklessly flinging themselves in, somehow they always escaped the thrusting antlers that would have impaled any wolf they struck.

Coincident with the attack, the wolf that had trotted past the bull suddenly leaped in, struck at the elk's good rear leg, and severed the tendon. Now the bull was powerless in both rear quarters. Braced on its front feet, oddly as though it were sitting down, the elk still thrust with its antlers. But mobility was gone, and with it defense.

The wolves were bolder now, striking faster and harder. The bull thrashed desperately in the snow, made one wildly convulsive effort to regain its feet, then fell all the way and did not move again.

Inserting the telephoto lens in his 35 mm. still camera, Jase took a dozen pictures and went soberly on. The killing of the crippled bull had not been a pleasant spectacle, but Jase realized that he had just witnessed and

photographed mercy and justice in their most elemental forms. Wolves must eat, and that was just. In killing to eat, they had been unknowingly merciful, for, had the bull lived, the brightest prospect in store would have been slow starvation. Wolves had their uses; nature did care for its own.

He was a hundred yards farther along the bench when something occurred to him. Something, Jase told himself with a little feeling of guilt, that Tom Rainse would have thought of at once. While not exactly skimpy, his menu was not the most varied he had ever enjoyed and only a little way away lay an abundance of elk steaks. Dropping the toboggan draw rope, Jase returned to the place from which he'd taken his pictures, Buckles bouncing at his side.

The wolves were tearing at their kill. Jase gulped, telling himself shakily that wolves feared people and would never stand their ground against a human being. He had even read in *Forests and Waters* that wolves had never been known to kill anyone in this state. But suppose these wolves hadn't read the same article?

Choosing the better part of valor, Jase broke a handful of dead twigs from a nearby pine, built a fire, and when it was blazing he fired a dry knot. Armed with this, he advanced toward the wolves. He hadn't taken ten steps toward them when all five streaked away.

As soon as he saw that the wolves were on the run, Buckles growled his contempt of these cowardly creatures that wouldn't stay and fight. Laughing at him in nervous relief, Jase knelt beside the dead elk, cut as much meat as he could carry, and beat a hasty retreat. Back at the toboggan, he looked around and saw that the wolves had returned to their interrupted meal.

As he started off again, Jase muttered at himself for forgetting to take pictures of the wolves hastily leaving their kill. He shrugged and went on. He'd discovered long ago that a wildlife photographer needed at least ten hands. Two or three extra brains, to help one think of all the things that should be considered, would not come amiss either. But staying alert for new opportunities would at least accomplish more than lamenting those hopelessly lost.

His course took him down a short but steep little pitch into the broad valley of the Mary, where half a dozen feeding elk raised inquisitive heads to stare as Jase appeared. He stood uncertainly. Elk were everywhere, within easy camera range. But he'd learned that there is a vast difference between pictures and a picture story, and Dr. Goodell wanted the story. However, elk moving down the river valley were definitely a part of it.

Jase flicked the wide-angle lens on his movie camera into position, took a light reading, adjusted the lens for the correct aperture, and shot ten feet of

film. Then he inserted the wide-angle lens in his 35 mm., took six still pictures, and went on.

Most of the elk had funnelled down the narrow canyon to the wider valley of the Mary, but after reaching it, they had apparently divided into a number of small herds and scattered the width of the river valley. Forage was again the obvious answer. The first arrivals would not browse cleanly, for where so much food offered they could choose the tidbits they liked best. Those immediately behind them also wanted this choice food and had scattered to get it, some of them crossing the frozen Mary on the ice.

As was to be expected in pastures so rich, the elk grazed slowly. Since he did not want to outdistance the subjects whose migration he was supposed to record, Jase adjusted his pace to theirs.

He was perhaps three miles down the valley when Buckles bristled and fixed his gaze on something he scented farther along. A moment later two men appeared from a clump of trees and came up the valley. At first, Jase could be sure only that both wore wool hunting coats, caps, and that they carried rifles. From their stride, he knew also that they were woodsmen. Then they came nearer and he saw that they were Indians.

Jase remembered that Tom Rainse had spoken of an Indian village, and doubtless this pair belonged to it. But why were they carrying rifles? They must know that hunting was not allowed in Whitestone at any time.

The elder of the two Indians looked at Jase searchingly but without expression, then flicked his eyes over Buckles and the toboggan. The younger, who wore a red plaid coat, appeared to be a little older than Jase. He seemed friendly but curious.

“Hi,” Jase greeted. “Hunting something?”

“Bear,” the younger Indian said promptly. “Seen any?”

Jase shook his head. “I haven’t seen any rangers either, but you’d better be careful. You’re not supposed to hunt in the Park.”

The young man smiled fleetingly and waved a mittened hand northward. “This isn’t Whitestone. The boundary’s a full mile up the valley.”

“Oh, it is?” Jase was surprised. “Then these elk are already out of the Park?”

“Sure thing. But why are you ramming around out here by your lonesome, with all those cameras?”

Jase grinned. “Trying to get this elk migration down on movie film. I’m a photographer for the state Conservation Department. Say! Can I have your pictures?”

The second hunter said something to his companion in his own tongue, but the younger Indian didn’t answer him.

“Sure,” he told Jase agreeably.

Jase shot a sequence of the pair, wished them luck on their bear hunt, and continued down the valley. The two Indians watched him silently until he was out of earshot, then the older one spoke, still using his own language.

"I do not like this, Linus," he said uneasily.

"Nor I," his young companion agreed.

"I cannot remember when a white man has come down the valley of the Mary after the snows have begun," the older man went on. "This youth who takes pictures will follow the elk—he said so—and when he reaches the place of the ridges—"

"It could not last forever. I have said so before."

"I was waiting for a signal from you, Linus. We might have killed him easily. Then we would have had only to put his body beneath the ice and no one—"

"Do not talk of killing!" Linus snapped. "Are you mad?"

"Sometimes I think the ways of our fathers were best," the older man said bitterly. "They gloried when they killed, and were accounted the better men for it. We have become nothing—a village of weaklings in a land that was once ours. You are very wise, for all your youth, but sometimes I think you have had too much of the white man's schooling. What good has it done you?"

"What good did killing white men do our ancestors?" Linus retorted. "We are now what we are, and the white man's laws are our laws."

"Suppose this young man is one of those who protect the elk for what the white men call their—*sport*?" The older man spat out the last word.

"He is very young and he does not carry a gun of any kind. He is not a game warden."

"I still do not like it," the older man grumbled. "Since you are opposed to killing him, could not you, with your knowledge of what the white men teach each other, have told him something that would have made him turn back?"

Linus shook his head. "I thought of it, but he does not lack intelligence. Besides, his only purpose can be to follow the elk, whether he is a game warden, as you suspect, or what he appears to be, a taker of pictures. In either case, he was sent here for information by his superiors."

"If they but knew all!" the older man said meaningly.

"They must know all if they know any," Linus answered thoughtfully.

"I do not see what you mean."

"I have a plan. You have said that I understand the white man's ways, which are not ours. It is true. I will use that understanding for the good of the village if you will let me follow the young man alone."

"While I return and warn the other hunters?"

“No. While you continue to hunt for the bear.”

For a moment the older man looked steadily at Linus, then turned without a word and continued on up the valley.

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A half-hour later the older Indian swerved from the river into a rocky canyon. As he entered, he looked back down the valley and shook his head. How had white men come to control the lives of Indians and beasts without ever controlling their own foolish habit of building a roaring great fire just to cook a meal?

When the plane went over the column of smoke and dipped its wings, the Indian did not see it. He was looking for a suitable pine knot to smoke the bear out of its cave.

## *Indian Tactics*

The eastward bend of the Mary River was just ahead and elk were climbing the low ridge that flanked it. Here they left the river; the scattered bunches that had grazed down the valley were coming together to take a single path over the ridge and head almost directly southward. Jase used his wide-angle lens to take in the bend of the river and the bunches of elk heading for the ridge, then flicked his telephoto lens into place for a closer view of the elk crowding together on the path over the ridge.

Looking around for other good sequences, he noticed three cow elk crossing the frozen river at the bend, rather than higher up, as the other elk did. Evidently they had grazed down the east bank of the river farther than the rest of the bunch they belonged to, and were hurrying to catch up. At any rate, in their haste they were trying to run, but slipping and sliding on the ice in a most undignified way.

Grinning at the sight, Jase shifted back to his standard lens and sighted on them. His eye to the finder, he shot them as they came. Suddenly one of the three disappeared. Jase lowered the camera, his finger still on the exposure lever, and stared blankly. His eyes were not playing tricks. The other two elk were now climbing the bank, but one was gone.

Ordering Buckles to stay by the toboggan, Jase made his way carefully out on the river ice. He came to the place where the elk had disappeared, and looked down at a freak ice formation. Most of the Mary was frozen solidly enough to support a loaded truck, but only a brittle shell surrounded the hole where the elk had gone through. Swift water, undoubtedly caused by the sharp bend in the course of the river, eddied in the hole. There was no sign of the elk; it had been sucked under the ice by the swirling water.

Jase walked slowly back to shore, took up the toboggan's draw rope, and he and Buckles left the Mary and started climbing the ridge. That night they camped beside the migration route.

The next day was only a couple of hours old when, from a high ridge that overlooked a series of rocky low ones, Jase looked out on a panoramic scene that brought him to a stop.

The low ridges beneath him were sparsely forested and spread like groping fingers from central spines of rock. All the central spines ran in a southerly direction, and were separated by rocky, shallow canyons. The

illusion of groping fingers was heightened by the fact that ridges on opposite sides of the same canyon stretched toward each other, as though they were trying to touch. The sides of all the ridges were steep. Most were sheer, with a drop of fifty to seventy-five feet into the canyons.

The elk trail Jase had been following dipped onto a central spine beneath him and a little to his right. Along this spine, and for as far as he could see, bunches of elk that varied from two or three to as many as twenty animals were working southward. They must follow this or another spine because it was impossible to descend into the steep canyons, and evidently this spine was their favorite route.

Far down, the central spines appeared to converge into valleys, and the ridges there seemed to be more gently rolling, like the hills flanking Taborville. They were, however, thickly covered with evergreens.

As Jase returned his gaze to the scene directly beneath him, he gave a startled second look, then grabbed frantically at Buckles' collar and dragged both the big Airedale and the toboggan behind a scrub pine tree. Retaining his grip on Buckles, Jase knelt, fumbled with his free hand at one of the ropes that lashed the tarp over the toboggan, succeeded in untying it, and knotted the loose end in Buckles' collar.

As Buckles flattened his ears and rolled his eyes, wondering what he'd done to deserve such treatment, Jase stood up and peered cautiously around the bushy tree.

Below Jase, thrusting out from the spine down which the elk were traveling, was a ridge perhaps three hundred yards long. Its sides and end were nearly perpendicular, and from the treeless top of the ridge to the canyon floor below was a sheer drop of fifty feet or more. Near the far end of the ridge were six or eight elk. Spread out across the width of the ridge, and advancing purposefully on the elk, were a dozen Indians.

Jase pulled out his color camera and flicked the telephoto lens into position. He raised the camera's finder to his eye, depressed the exposure lever, and clenched his jaws as the whirring motor told him that everything happening below was being recorded on film. In spite of the biting wind his face felt flushed, and he wanted to turn and run, and not witness such a scene. But he remained where he was and the camera did not waver.

For a fleeting moment, memory took him back to Dr. Goodell's office and again he was hearing Tom Rainse offer various explanations as to why half the Keewatin elk never appeared at the winter feeding grounds. The warden had thought the Indian village was too far east of the migration route, had he? Tom hadn't known about *this* route, or what happened on it, but he would. The situation was all too clear. Leaving the Mary River valley, the only possible route for the migrating elk lay along the south-sloping

spines. The Indians had merely to wait for the herd they wanted, chase it out on a ridge, and now they were ready to finish the job.

The advancing men were much nearer now, and the elk were tossing their heads and stamping their feet uncertainly. They knew of the drop that awaited, but they dared not try to break through the line of men.

A sudden shriek arose and Jase flinched, but continued to record the scene as part of a nightmare. Waving their hands and yelling, the men suddenly started running toward the elk. For a moment the herd stood its ground. Then animal nerves snapped and animal judgment surrendered to panic. Turning, the elk raced to the end of the ridge and flung themselves over.

Through the view finder Jase saw a big cow land on her head, balance for a second like some trained performing animal, and then, kicking wildly, roll over on her side. Another landed beside her, and the two struck at each other with hoofs that moved in a macabre dance of death. Near them, a spike bull, down in the rear quarters and dragging himself along with his front feet, tried to go forward.

The suddenly different sound of the camera's motor told Jase that he had run off all his film. He thought of the other camera, but all strength had drained out of his body and he couldn't move. Feeling sick to his stomach, he just stared at the dead elk and those that still struggled.

Indians, Tom Rainse had said, a mixture of tribes, who hung out in the Keewatin. In summer they worked for dude ranchers. In winter, since nobody cared what happened to them when they couldn't work, they retreated to a wilderness village whose location Tom had pointed out. Because they couldn't earn enough in summer to see them through the winter, probably they knew some hungry times, and got what game they could.

Jase ran his tongue over dry lips. The Indians *would* know some hungry times if it were not for the Keewatin elk. Some might even die from hunger. Jase's head stopped spinning and the sickness left his stomach. He'd lived through a nightmare, but now he began to see it in its true light.

The spectacle had sickened him, as it would any civilized person, but it was nothing that, throughout the world's history, had not happened ten thousand or ten million times. When all humans wore skins and lived accordingly, it had been a commonplace of everyday life, a substitute for going to the grocery store. Now, here, in front of him, these Indians were merely using a centuries-old hunting scheme for getting food.

Jase wondered at himself. Law was law, deserving the respect of all people, and neither Indian nor anyone else had a right to break it. So why



was he trying to find an excuse for what, to put it in its best light, was near-wholesale slaughter?

Well, regardless of what he thought, this scene was part of what Dr. Goodell wanted to see. It was Jase's job to get it. Kneeling, he balanced the camera on his knee and removed the roll of spent film. He slipped on the clamp that prevented the film from unrolling, placed it in its carton and put the carton in a waterproof rubber container. Reloading with fresh film, he resumed his stance beside the tree.

The Indians had gone back toward the central spine and were descending a steep cleft in the ridge. Once on the canyon floor, they methodically killed any wounded elk with axes and clubs. When the last elk lay still, the Indians discarded their axes in favor of knives and began to butcher their slaughtered game. Jase filmed the scene, then gladly turned his head away and looked down the rocky spine again.

Scattered from a point perhaps a quarter of a mile from the ridge over which the unfortunate herd had been driven to that place where the spine dipped into lower hills and bushy evergreens, Jase counted thirty-one bunches of elk, perhaps three hundred animals. They were moving slowly southward, completely unconcerned over the fate of their dead companions. Wondering about this, Jase thought back to the frightened elk he had seen fleeing from the hunters' guns on the opening day of the season.

Ambushed on the border, most of the elk that had not been killed then had fled back into the sanctuary of the Park to recover from their fright. Blasting rifles had been in part responsible for turning back the elk ambushed at the border, but doubtless the blood from slaughtered animals had been a far more influential factor, for even domestic animals fear the smell of blood. But here the situation had been different. Aside from the fact that they'd used no firearms, the Indians had taken an entire bunch rather than select a few animals from it. There were none left alive to spread panic to the rest. Themselves safe, the elk ahead and behind had never a thought for those that had been separated and driven off the end of the ridge.

Led by an old cow, a bunch of nine elk walked down the beaten path near Jase. Evidently all the herd had not left the valley of the Mary yet, though there couldn't be many except stragglers remaining. Jase let the nine pass and again turned his telephoto lens on the scene below.

The Indians had worked with swift efficiency, and were loading quarters of skinned and butchered elk on toboggans. That was odd; where had the toboggans come from? Jase looked again, and discovered that there were now sixteen Indians. Though he could see into the canyon clearly, neither the extra men nor the toboggans had been in sight before. Therefore, they must have been hidden on the far side of the ridge, waiting.

That meant that not only was this killing of migrating elk by Indians nothing new, but they'd done it so often that they'd reduced it to a routine job. Doubtless the ridge from which they'd stampeded the elk was peculiarly adapted to the purpose. The Indians knew so well what they were doing, and were so certain of success, that they hid extra men and toboggans in the canyon, to help carry their meat to the village.

Finally, each pulled by two men, the laden toboggans started down the canyon and Jase photographed them as they went. When the last one disappeared, he lowered his camera and mechanically began to wind up the spring.

Suddenly Buckles gave a warning growl. Jase whirled to see the younger of the two Indian hunters whom he had met on the Mary. About fifteen yards up the slope, he was standing beside a hemlock thicket in which, Jase suspected, he had been hiding for some time. Jase also noted that he was down wind, which accounted for the fact that Buckles had not scented him. The Indian stood perfectly still, his rifle cradled in his arms, his red plaid hunting coat vivid against the snow.

"Where did you come from?" Jase blurted.

"I've been following you. I thought we'd better have a talk. Did you get it all down in pictures?"

"Yes," Jase said defiantly.

"What will you do with the film?"

"Give it to my boss in the Conservation Department."

"I see."

The young man started down the hill toward them and Buckles watched him uncertainly. Jase slipped the camera into its case and his hand stole involuntarily to the axe at his belt.

The barest glimmer of a smile lighted the young Indian's face as he said, "I think we can talk it out."

A little sheepishly, Jase let the axe slide back into its sheath and tried to think of something he might say that would relieve the tension.

"Where's your partner?" he asked as calmly as he could.

"I told him I could handle this and left him to continue the hunt for the bear."

"Think he'll get it?"

"Possibly. But the important thing was to keep him from hunting you."

Jase gulped at the implication. "Me?"

The Indian nodded at the camera case. "He wouldn't be very happy in jail, and you have enough evidence to send quite a few of us there."

"I had to do it. It's my job," Jase said defensively.

The young man nodded. “I understand, and I’ve always known that sooner or later it would happen. It would have happened before this if someone had taken the trouble to map elk concentrations and migration routes. That’s one trait of white men that I doubt if you yourselves understand; you spend millions of dollars to establish such a park as Whitestone and then don’t bother to find out what you really have in it.”

Jase played for time. “Do you live in the village, too?”

“I do now; my people live there.” He was silent a moment, as if deciding what to say. “I’ve had a bit more education than the rest and, at least theoretically, a better understanding of white men. As I said, I always knew this would happen some day and I’ve felt that a lot would depend on the sort of person who found it out. I watched you a full twenty minutes, wondering if you planned to take the films you have and rush back with the cry that the Indians are guilty of poaching.”

“Aren’t you?” Jase demanded. “You know the season is over, don’t you?”

“Did you ever watch an elk hunt—in season?”

“I just came from the hunt on the Park border.”

“Then you should know that the Indians have no hunting licenses and not enough rifles and ammunition; they can’t afford either. They do not have a taxidermist mount the heads of the animals they kill; if they wanted to they couldn’t afford that either. They do not carry the meat home to give a banquet for their club. They haven’t any clubs and, if they had, they wouldn’t give the meat away because they need it. In short, we Indians are criminal because we kill elk for food.”

“Regardless of any other consideration, there is a law about hunting elk, to protect them. If there weren’t, they’d all be killed off.”

“Not by the Indians. We kill to eat, not for what your white hunters call sport. Considering our reasons, don’t you honestly think that what you’ve just seen here is justifiable, and within the spirit of the law?”

“Well, I know what you mean,” Jase admitted uncomfortably. “Yes,” he admitted. “If I was hungry enough I’d probably kill an elk or two myself!”

“And you’d consider it right?”

“I guess it would be, under the circumstances.”

“Good! Now you told me before that you’re here to get this elk migration down on film. Correct?”

“It is.”

“All right. I won’t take your camera or destroy your film, and I won’t even try to hinder your taking them back to the Conservation Department. But will you try to get *all* of the migration?”

“Of course. That’s why I’m here.”

“It can be dangerous.”

“What do you mean, dangerous?”

“You’ll see. But I’ll do what I can to help you.” The Indian smiled and extended his hand. “I’m Linus Bradley.”

“Jase Mason.” Jase shook the proffered hand warmly.

“I’d like to invite you to our village but it wouldn’t be a good idea right now,” Linus said. “There may be others there who think as my hunting partner does. But I know a sheltered place to camp. Come on.”

Side by side, Linus Bradley giving a hand with the toboggan and Buckles pacing alternately behind or alongside, they started down the sloping spine. About two hours later, on the fringe of the bushy evergreens that Jase had noted from a distance and in a canyon to one side of the migration route, they stopped to camp.

## chapter seven

# *Meat Hunters*

Buckles, whose crinkly whiskers bore the usual rime of frost that gathered when he slept outside on cold nights, bounced up and wagged an enthusiastic morning greeting. As he ruffled the big Airedale's ears, Jase pondered some strictly private thoughts.

Two and two ordinarily make four, but this morning Jase couldn't be sure whether they added up to three, six, or sixteen. Linus Bradley, nobody's fool, knew that elk season was past. Undoubtedly he also knew that, even during the season, authorized elk hunters must have a special permit. Therefore his people had broken the law, however justifiable he might think it was. He had seen Jase film the entire sequence of the herd's being stampeded over the cliff, and Jase had told him that he intended to turn the film over to the Conservation Department. The whole Indian village could get in serious trouble because of it.

There was much Linus might have done about it. He might not have been willing to go to the lengths that his older partner had evidently had in mind, but he certainly could have prevented Jase from taking his pictures. Then, if Jase chose to make an issue of the matter, it would be his unsupported word against the assertions of a whole village of Indians who probably would be willing to swear that they knew nothing whatever about any illegally killed elk. Instead, Linus had chosen to do nothing. He hadn't even asked, in a friendly manner, that Jase give him the film upon which the Indians' wrongdoing was recorded.

There must be a reason for it, but Jase couldn't imagine what it was. Could it be that Linus knew his people had done wrong, that the punishment that would surely follow a viewing of Jase's film would be merely justice, and as such must be meekly accepted? Jase discarded that notion almost as soon as he conceived it.

Then he had another, and stranger, thought: that Linus saw no reason to take action because his people *hadn't* done wrong. The notion was so forcible that Jase had to remind himself that it lacked value. The law explicitly stated that it was illegal to kill elk out of season, and it made no difference if those who did it were obeying a natural law like hunger. Or . . . did it?

Was there more behind the Indian's friendly, reasonable manner than there appeared? And what had he meant by saying that trying to film the rest of the migration might be dangerous? Was that a threat? Jase decided that, until he knew exactly what Linus had in mind, he'd do very well to watch his every step.

He stole a glance at the young Indian, who was facing away from him and shuffling his feet in a peculiar manner. Turning, Linus saw him watching, so Jase grinned broadly.

"If I may ask, what's that little ceremony with your feet? A war dance?"

Linus smiled fleetingly. "Hardly. Just wanted to limber up before hitting the trail."

"I see. That reminds me. Neither you nor your partner had snowshoes when I met you along the Mary."

"We don't use 'em until we have to and the snow wasn't deep when we left. We know that, if we got caught along the river, the elk would beat a trail we could follow. It won't be long before we'll be on snowshoes, though."

"Why?"

"Snow's coming," Linus said practically.

"I mean," Jase amended, "how do you know?"

The first grin Jase had seen there appeared on Linus' face. "A little bird told me. What about breakfast, paleface?"

"A good idea, red brother."

After a quick breakfast, Linus gave a hand on the draw rope and they broke Jase's toboggan loose from the bed where frost had partially anchored it. Buckles pacing cockily beside them, they started back toward the south-sloping spine that the elk were still following. As they climbed up the side of the spine, Jase asked a question that had been puzzling him.

"Do all elk that come out of the valley of the Mary follow this same spine?"

"Practically all of them do," Linus said. "It's the only one of all these spines without a difficult break and at the same time it offers forage for a moving herd. Naturally there are always a few stragglers, I suppose you might call them the rugged individualists of their kind, who go to one side or another."

"How many elk come through?" Jase asked him.

Linus shrugged. "Depends on the year and various factors, such as how many calves survived to migrate. At a guess, I'd say there have never been less than a thousand and sometimes nearly twice that. The average is probably about fourteen or fifteen hundred."

"Where are they heading?"

"Taborville feeding grounds, I guess. I've never followed them that far."

“Doesn’t the snow slow them up?”

“This much snow will never stop a herd of elk. It takes about four feet to give them real trouble.”

“Then why do they never show up?”

“Let’s stop talking,” Linus said shortly.

They walked silently on, threading their way among the pines that now covered most of the rocky spine they were traveling. Buckles swerved away and peered hopefully into various trees in search of a chickaree to threaten. Jase pondered the information he now had.

He no longer doubted that this was the missing herd; any good field man with time enough to follow the migration could have discovered the fact for himself. But as Tom Rainse had pointed out, the elk migration coincided with the hunting season, and in hunting season there were no wardens to spare for a detailed study. In addition, though it was generally understood that the migrating herd did not move as one great unit, there had been a wholly natural assumption that all started at about the same time and that probably no more than three or four days separated the first migrants from the last.

As Jase had discovered, that was a complete error, for the big elk herd in Whitestone split before ever starting the migration. Those that left summer pastures when browse became scanty, and crossed the ten or fifteen miles of upland where food was even harder to find, did not re-cross the upland when migrating. Instead, they descended into the valley of the Mary and traveled these ridges toward Taborville. Then why didn’t they get there?

Jase stole another glance at his companion. He liked the young Indian and thought Linus liked him, but there was still a barrier between them, and Linus was certainly not telling all he knew. Jase wondered again, uneasily, why the Indian had done nothing about the damning film.

An hour later, at the sound of a motor, Jase raised his eyes to see the Mountain Airways plane winging purposefully northward. Immediately he felt better. He had only to light two smoky fires in order to let the pilot know that he needed help, and it would be on the way.

As the plane disappeared, Jase swept his eyes around the horizon. Linus had forecast deep snow soon, but save for a few lazy clouds, the sky was serene enough. Still, Linus was probably right; deep snows were due. But Jase was confident that he’d be in Taborville before they fell.

Suddenly he heard an unfamiliar sound.

Jase had kept his ears tuned to the usual woodland noises, such as the creaking of wind-swayed trees, the rubbing of branches, the sound of the wind in the pines, and the occasional chatter of a squirrel or raspy shriek of a

jay. The sound that had halted him, no great distance away but muffled, was not a natural sound of the wilderness. Jase turned to his companion.

“That sounds like rifle fire.”

“It does at that.”

“Could it be hunters from your village?”

Linus gave him a strange look. “Let’s go see.”

They went cautiously on. A few minutes later fourteen elk came racing up the spine toward them. Normally all traveling elk observe a sedate order in their line of march, led by an experienced cow or the herd bull. These elk were too terrified to think of order. Led by a spike bull, and with the others running in order of their speed, they pounded wildly to one side when they saw the two young men, swerved back to the trail behind them, and raced on up the spine.

“Look at them go!” Jase said. “Those elk act like the ones I saw on the border, after they’d been spooked by rifle fire from hunters.”

“Come on,” Linus said shortly.

Presently two more bunches, one of five elk and one of seven, swerved around the two youths and raced on up the spine. As Jase and Linus went on, the elk trail they were following dropped from the spine into a valley between lower hills that were thickly studded with big boulders and scrub. The main migration route led down the valley, but lesser trails entered every little draw that opened from the valley.

Linus led Jase to one side and halted in a thick growth of pines.

“Leave your toboggan here,” he said. “Tie your dog to it, and leave him some food.”

Jase loosed a rope, tied Buckles, rummaged in a pack for food and left it within reach of the dog. He was finishing when he snapped erect. Down in the main valley sounded an unmistakable volley of rifle fire.

As the rolling echoes of the volley faded into the hills and became lost, Jase looked sharply at Linus, as though he might offer an explanation of what was happening. The young Indian’s face was unreadable.

“That *was* rifle fire,” Jase said. “Do you know what all this shooting is for?”

“Elk,” Linus replied calmly. “I said I’d help you get a complete documentary of this migration.”

“What’s it all about, Linus? Don’t be so mysterious.”

The Indian pointed down the valley. “That’s the natural and easiest route to the Taborville winter feeding grounds. You asked me before why the herd never gets to Taborville. You’ve just heard the answer.”

“Then those are poachers’ rifles!”



“White poachers,” Linus said bitterly. “Organized, ruthless meat hunters that kill whole herds for money, not a few animals for food, as we do.”

“You mean to tell me—”

“Just a minute,” the Indian interrupted. “I want you to understand the situation—all of it. As I’ve told you, about fifteen hundred elk take the migration route down the Mary River and along these ridges, as you’ve seen. When they get to this valley, the poachers shoot ’em down.”

“They shoot fifteen hundred elk?” Jase gasped.

Linus shook his head. “No, but it might be better if they did. I don’t know how many they shoot, or what happens to them. But I do know what happens to the elk they *don’t* shoot. You remember those frightened bunches we saw, that you said reminded you of elk you’d seen spooked by hunters’ rifles at the Park boundary?”

Jase nodded.

“Same thing here, except that the elk at the boundary get through to Taborville when the hunters have gone. These don’t get through. They hide in those draws that open off the valley. Then, when the heavy snows come, too deep for them to get around, they backtrack along the windswept top of the spines and go back to the valley of the Mary, where the forage is better.”

“But what about the snow? Doesn’t it get just as deep along the Mary as it does here?”

Linus nodded grimly. “It sure does. Back on the Mary, when the elk have pawed down to what grass they can find, they eat the willows. When the willows are gone, at least half of them starve. You should get a picture of elk skeletons that are washed into the river when it floods in early spring.”

Jase stared at him. “And all because these meat hunters prevent the elk from getting through to Taborville?”

“The ones they don’t shoot, yes.”

As if to emphasize his statement, the sound of more rifle fire came from somewhere ahead.

“How can they get away with it?” Jase asked.

“That’s the least of their troubles. The normal complement of elk are on the feeding grounds, counted and cared for. Except for you, who with even a remote connection with the Conservation Department knows this herd is here?”

“I should think plenty of people in Taborville would know.”

“They probably do,” Linus admitted, “because the poachers must come from around there. But the ones who know are in on it, or benefit from it, or just don’t care. For another thing, the market hunters just operate for a short time.”

“How long do they stay in the valley?”

“As long as there’s a chance of more elk coming through, which means until the snow’s deep enough to stop them.”

“Let’s go!” Jase snapped. “Let’s go get ’em on film! I want every one of them so clear that the wardens won’t need any other evidence to convict them of market hunting!”

“All right,” said Linus, “but I’m going to take the lead. You’re going to follow. I told you this could be dangerous; we’ll have to keep out of sight.” He looked at all the equipment Jase was carrying. “Can’t you leave some of that stuff? We’ll have to crawl part of the way.”

Jase considered. He’d need both movie cameras, in case something happened to one, and extra film, which would be in his pockets. But he could leave his still camera, and his belt axe, and the bulky case for the turret-head camera, and carry the camera around his neck on its strap. He stowed these articles under the tarp on the toboggan, then turned to Linus.

“Lead on.”

Without another word, Linus started climbing toward the rim of the valley. The tethered Buckles looked wistful as Jase followed, then sighed resignedly and settled down in the lee of the toboggan. Though he didn’t like this, Buckles had been left before, and had sublime confidence that Jase would return for him.

The sides of the valley were covered with bushy pines, probably a healing cover for some long-ago fire. Jase marveled at the way Linus traveled among them. The branches of every tree seemed to touch those of at least one neighbor, but Linus drifted through as though his body lacked both weight and substance. Rare was the occasion when a pine bough so much as quivered after he passed. Jase envied such ability.

Elk tracks were everywhere, and often they flushed a little bunch of resting animals. Jase’s anger mounted. According to Linus, virtually the entire second section of the Keewatin elk were waiting in these pines for a chance to continue their journey to the Taborville feeding grounds in safety. But they were waiting in vain. Regardless of the route they chose, danger or death awaited; rifles ahead, winter starvation behind.

Though he never seemed to glance to either side, as one noting landmarks would, Linus walked with the confident air of one who knows precisely where he’s going and what he’s doing. Soon they were so far back on the ridge, where the small pines restricted visibility to a few feet, that Jase was no longer certain as to which direction the valley lay. Presently they heard another volley of rifle fire. Linus halted and turned.

“We can walk for a ways yet, but when I start to crawl, you do the same and don’t make any sudden moves. Those men have good eyesight.”

“With these bright coats of ours, they won’t need good eyesight. Lead the way.”

Linus cut at a sharp angle to the course he had been following and Jase walked in his tracks. Here were numerous boulders around which they must detour, and the snow hid uneven, rocky ground. Then, a short distance from a sharply rising hump, the Indian stopped and pointed. Following his extended arm, Jase saw on the other side of the hump an oddly misshapen pine tree. About ten feet from the ground the trunk bent at right angles, ran a few feet, then curved upward to form a sort of rough chair.

“When we reach that pine,” Linus said in a low voice, “we should be able to look right down into the pot hunters’ stand. From here on we crawl.”

Linus swung his rifle on his back, dropped to his knees and started crawling. After rearranging the camera case to hang down his back rather than from his shoulder, Jase followed suit. They crawled around the shoulder of the hump, worked down behind the misshapen pine’s trunk, and had a clear view of the valley.

It was perhaps three hundred yards between the summits of the two ridges that hemmed the valley in. Twenty feet downslope from the misshapen pine was a near-perpendicular ledge of rock that seemed to have been put there expressly to mark the end of the tree line. There was a similar ledge near the rim of the ridge directly across, but from that one a thick patch of little pines spread down the opposite slope. Save for those pines, the expanse of valley before them was treeless. A cheek-stinging wind blew out of the north end.

Except for a solitary raven sitting in a dead pine on the opposite slope, there was no living creature in sight. Though he could certainly see nothing threatening, Jase kept his eyes on Linus, who was looking intently up the valley. Presently the Indian said softly, “Get your camera ready.”

Jase took a light reading, adjusted his camera accordingly, and waited. A cow elk had appeared around a curve in the upper valley and about two hundred yards away. After advancing a few yards she halted and swung her head to look back in the direction from which she had come. Obviously she was waiting for something.

Jase’s tension mounted so that each passing second became an hour. Mechanically he saw the raven leave the dead pine and struggle slowly up against the wind. After what seemed an interminable wait, the rest of the herd to which the cow belonged came around the bend in the valley. It included five more cows, four well-grown spring calves, a moderate-sized herd bull, and two spike bulls that kept nervously to the rear.

Her herd reunited, the cow that had first appeared resumed her journey down the valley. Now they moved as a compact unit, with the herd bull, who

seemed in a surly mood, keeping his nose even with the lead cow's rump and the rest grouped behind them. The cows and calves shifted positions as some hurried past their companions and others dropped back. Only the two spike bulls stayed in the very rear.

As the herd neared the stand of bushy evergreens that ran down the opposite side of the valley, Linus whispered, "Focus now, and start your camera."

Jase sighted on the herd, depressed the exposure lever, and the reassuring whir of the camera's motor told him that the scene was being recorded. It was a prosaic-enough sequence, but Jase had trouble in keeping his camera from trembling, so sure was he that the placid scene was about to be disrupted. When he heard the rifles, he was ready.

Through the finder of his camera, within itself a small window, he watched the lead cow, the herd bull and three of the other elk fall. For an instant the remainder of the herd stood perfectly still, as though shocked into immobility, then they whirled and raced back up the valley.

The rifles roared again. A running cow fell, rolled over on her back, and kicked furiously with all four hoofs. One of the calves seemed to stumble over her, and fell to its knees. Stricken in mid-leap, another cow dropped to the snow like a giant discarded toy. One of the spike bulls lifted a left rear leg and continued to run on the remaining three. Led by the unhurt spike bull and with the wounded one trailing, the five remaining elk raced back up the valley and disappeared around the bend.

"Now watch the pines," came Linus' low voice.

Lowering the camera so he could look over it, Jase rewound his camera as fast as he could, then snapped the telephoto lens into place.

The first of five men who emerged from ambush in the pines was a big, red-bearded man in a dark plaid hunting coat. Anxious to get him on film clearly enough to be recognized, Jase focused on his face and ran off a sequence. He photographed each of the other four as he could see their faces.

So intent was he that he didn't feel Linus' hand on his belt until it jerked him off balance and he fell in the snow on one elbow.

"Down! Get down, you fool!"

With a start Jase realized that, to get effective pictures, he had risen to his knees. How could he have been so stupid?

"They've seen you!" Linus said urgently. "Crawl back out of sight!"

They wriggled behind the misshapen pine and back of the hump of rock beside it, then Linus rose.

"We'll have to run for it," he told Jase. "I don't think they saw me, so we'll have a better chance if we separate. You follow our tracks back, and

I'll make another set to confuse them. Meet me at the toboggan.”

“Good enough!”

As the Indian disappeared among the pines, Jase started running, crooking his right arm in front of his face to shield it from whipping branches. He made an abortive attempt to slip the movie camera inside his coat, then stopped trying and ran on with the camera dangling from its cord.

He knew the meat hunters could track them in the snow, but Linus' ruse might delay them. Once he and the Indian reached the toboggan and got back on the trampled elk highway, their tracks would be almost indistinguishable.

Jase swerved to avoid a boulder and ran into one of the bushy pines. A branch caught the leather strap of his camera case and jerked him backward. He was aware of falling and hitting the boulder, then he blacked out.

chapter eight

## *Desperate Flight*

The scream of the north wind drowned all other sounds. Driven by the wind, a great herd of elk was struggling. They'd all starve if Jase was unable to turn the herd, but it was a near-hopeless task to make them face back into the bitter wind. But he must try, he must keep the herd moving for just a little while, then he could bring it to a safe haven.

The vision faded and Jase opened his eyes to discover that the roaring of the wind was in his head. He sat up, and when he did a wave of dizziness flooded through him so that he lay back down at once. His head was aching as it had never ached before. He realized vaguely that he was in a dark tent, lying on a cot, and he wondered bewilderedly why that should be.

At first he could think of nothing. Then he remembered.

He saw, as through a shimmering haze, the pine with the chair-shaped trunk to which Linus had led him. Again, in memory, the elk came down the valley to be met by point-blank fire from the hidden meat hunters. Then Linus warning him down, their flight, his fall, and his dropping the camera into the snow.

That much he remembered, but he hadn't the vaguest idea as to what had happened since or how he had come here. He raised exploring fingers to his aching head, winced, but felt reassured. There was a large swelling over his left ear, but the skin wasn't broken; he had merely knocked himself out.

The tent flaps parted and two men came in. Jase had a fleeting instant to note that one man was much bigger than the other, and that there was bright moonlight outside the tent. Then he closed his eyes, let his body go limp, and listened.

"He's still out," said a deep voice that Jase guessed belonged to the big man.

"'Pears to be," a second voice agreed. "Why'n thunder din'cha knock him on the head right where he fell, Terry?"

"If you live long enough, Matt," said the deep voice of Terry, "you may develop some brains, but I doubt it. Killin' elk is one thing. Killin' a human, with three witnesses to watch, is somethin' else."

"They was four witnesses," Matt reminded. "You forgot the second set of tracks."

“I ain’t forgot a thing! What’s more, I aim to go back and puzzle out them tracks first thing in the mornin’. Meantime, we got to take the best care of this picture-takin’ kid.”

“Terry! Ye’re off yer bat! He saw what we done.”

“Shut up and listen,” Terry said shortly. “When this kid wakes up, we’ll feed him. Then we’ll give him all his gear, except the camera with the pictures in it, and you’ll put him on the trail to Taborville.”

At mention of the camera, Jase thought they had found the camera with the damning film, the one he had dropped. Then he realized that Terry must be talking about the second movie camera, the one loaded with black and white film.

“Send him to Taborville!” Matt snorted. “Think what yer sayin’!”

“I am thinkin’! As soon as you’re a mile or so down the valley, you’re going to cut across and take this snoopy kid into Hell’s Tangle! You’re comin’ out, but he ain’t!”

“Oh.” Matt sounded pleased. “Oh, I get it.”

“Be sure you *forget* it afterwards. The last you saw of this kid, he was on the trail to Taborville. You don’t have to know what happened to him afterwards. But everybody’s goin’ to see you start out and to know that you’re plannin’ to put him on the Taborville trail. Now, let’s catch some sleep. Jake’s on guard tonight, and will see the kid if he comes to and leaves the tent.”

The two left and Jase opened his eyes. His head still throbbed, although what was bothering him now was his heart; he was afraid its pounding would arouse the whole camp. He tried to moisten his dry lips with his tongue and found the tongue dry too. He tried to stand and fell dizzily back, but rather than allow himself to lie down, he remained seated on the edge of the cot. After a moment, he seemed steadier and began to think more clearly.

The scheme sounded like a TV western, but Jase didn’t intend to play the lead in Terry’s little drama. From what Jase had heard, the poachers evidently hadn’t seen Linus, but had found his tracks. Terry was going to “puzzle” them out in the morning; that must mean that Linus had mixed up his tracks so well that they couldn’t be followed, or else it had grown dark. Where was Linus, anyway: had he gone back to his village? Well, where the Indian was Jase didn’t know, but he knew where *he* wanted to be—out.

There was a dark pile of clothing beside the cot, which turned out to be Jase’s belongings. He put on his cap and coat, and felt in the pockets. His mittens were there, but the extra film he’d been carrying was gone. He found the movie camera case, but just lifting it told him it was empty, as he’d expected it would be. Terry had probably smashed the camera with the idea that he was also destroying the pictures of the elk-killing in the valley.

Suddenly Jase heard a muffled commotion outside. Slinging the strap of the case over his shoulder, he tiptoed to the front of the tent, parted the flaps, and peered out.

Ten feet away, muffled to the ears in a great fur coat and sitting with his back to a tree, was a figure Jase could not identify. It must be the one Terry had called Jake. The guard appeared to be half asleep. There was no sign of what had caused the commotion.

The cold, silver moon hung low over the valley in the distance, but shed a light into the camp that almost equalled that of day. Jase saw another tent, and a pole corral in which three or four horses huddled together for warmth. By the corral was a horsedrawn bobsled, loaded and tarp-covered, which showed how the meat hunters transported their booty.

Closing the flap, Jase pussy-footed to the rear of the tent, felt for the canvas, lifted a section, and wriggled under on his stomach. The snow was frost-crisp, and Jase made so much noise that after the first three steps he stopped and tensed himself. But the die was cast and there was nothing for it except to go on. Unchallenged, Jase reached the packed trail leading up the valley and began to run.

His head still throbbed, but the cold night air made it feel better, and he could think more clearly. Though he could not know how far down the valley he'd been carried, he was sure that the misshapen pine was on his right and that his color camera lay near it. On a night such as this the pine should be clearly silhouetted against the sky and therefore easy to see.

Alternately walking and trotting, Jase went up the valley until he came to the stand of pines from which the poachers had ambushed the elk. Then he looked up the moon-silvered side of the valley. Sure enough, there on the top of the slope was the silhouette of the pine with the chair-shaped trunk.

When he had climbed up to it, he found where he and Linus had crouched beside it, then followed their tracks, dark in the snow, to where they had separated. From there on, it was harder to see, for the pines obscured the light of the moon. After two false tries, he found the boulder he had hit when he fell. Removing his mittens, he dropped to all fours and started probing in the snow. Ten minutes later he found the camera. The snow seemed to have cushioned its fall, for there were no outward evidences of damage. Jase brushed and blew away the snow clinging to the camera, wound it, held it to his ear, and heaved a sigh of relief when the motor ran. As was to be expected after lying in the snow, the motor ran slowly, but a couple of heating pads from the toboggan would bring it back to life.

Now, how to find the toboggan and the faithful Buckles, who would be lonesome but no doubt snugly bedded down under the snow. To try to



backtrack through the pines would be nearly hopeless; peering down at his tracks, Jase realized that he could scarcely see them.

Moving to an open spot among the trees, he looked up at the moon. Cloud formations were drifting across it, and Jase suddenly remembered Linus' prophecy that heavy snows were soon to fall. They would help shield him from any pursuit by the poachers, but he'd better find Buckles and the toboggan before snow fell.

Toboggan tracks! He and Linus had pulled the toboggan from the migration track and hidden it in the pines. If he followed the elk trail back up the valley, where there would be more light anyway, he should be able to see where the broad toboggan track turned off the trail. Jase left the pines, hurried down the slope, and at a fast trot began following the main elk trail back up the valley floor.

As he pushed along at an alternate walk and jog-trot, Jase reviewed his escape. It had been almost too easy: his being left alone in the tent, his coat and cap lying beside the cot, especially the sleeping guard. Had Terry really been so confident? Could it all have been a trick, to let him escape in hopes he would lead them to Linus, whose tracks they had seen beside his own? Was he being followed right now?

When he reached the bend in the valley around which he had seen the elk come toward the poachers' ambush, Jase suddenly stopped and turned around. As the drifting clouds moved away from the moon, he stood perfectly still and strained his eyes along his back trail. Then he searched both slopes of the valley. Jase could see absolutely nothing moving, no dark figure outlined against the snow. Trying to reassure himself that only luck and Terry's self-confidence had favored his escape, he turned and went on.

Once around the bend, Jase began to run, then stopped again, his heart thumping, as he detected motion up ahead. Studying the dark shapes, he realized that they were only elk. They had evidently been foraging in this upper valley and now, disturbed by his running, were fleeing into the pines. As he went on, slowly now, Jase saw more, and still more, until the whole upper valley seemed alive with elk.

Watching them fade away as he advanced, Jase remembered the frightened elk he had seen before: at the boundary the opening day of the season, and then, in this valley, fleeing from the poachers' rifles. Those at the boundary had been able to go on after the season closed, but these, Linus had said, would be held back by the meat hunters until stopped by heavy snow. Now Jase was seeing for himself what Linus had meant. These elk had been so terrified by rifle fire and the smell of their herd-mates' blood that they wouldn't even venture into the lower valley; he hadn't seen one there.

Jase set his jaw and plodded grimly up the valley. Well, he couldn't help the elk now. In fact, he couldn't help them at all unless he found Buckles and the toboggan and the food and equipment he would need if he was going to stay out of the poachers' hands.

Walking more slowly, unmindful of the elk that fled before him, Jase looked only for the toboggan's path. Twice he thought he'd found it, but the first proved to be a serpentine rock strata that reared above the snow line but which, in the uncertain light, seemed to be sunk beneath it. The second was a small creek bed that resembled a trail because snow had not filled it to the level of its surroundings.

Jase started to worry. Suppose he'd overrun the path? Tempted to turn back and look again, he forced himself on. He knew it was a common error to suppose that one had traveled much farther than was actually the case. A half hour later, he found the toboggan trail. Even at night, there was no mistaking it. The toboggan had sunk to a uniform depth, curling little ridges of snow on either side. Furthermore, two sets of human footprints, and Buckles' erratic paw prints, could also be seen.

Jase ran along the path, but when he entered the pines he had to let his eyes adjust to the denser gloom. Presently he saw the dark outline of the toboggan, then there was a wild flurry of snow, and Buckles leaped happily upon him.

The grizzled dog whined, beamed, wagged his tail, and jumped up to lick his master's face. Kneeling, Jase encircled the big Airedale's neck with both arms and hugged him tightly. He'd left Buckles tied to the toboggan, but somehow the dog had managed to loose himself. Jase didn't care what he'd done, as long as they were together again.

"So you wouldn't leave the toboggan, eh? Good dog!"

Jase disengaged his arms and Buckles promptly enjoyed a good roll in the snow. He rose to press as closely as possible to his master's legs when Jase pulled back the tarp on the toboggan. He retrieved his belt axe and slipped his still camera in his pocket, blessing Linus for having suggested that he leave part of his equipment behind. He returned the turret camera to its own case, and stuffed the empty case of the stolen camera under the tarp. Feeling around on the load, he found a tin of crackers, gave Buckles a handful, and filled one of his own pockets. Then, lashing the tarp down as best he could in the semi-darkness, he picked up the draw rope. Buckles frisking beside him, he began dragging the toboggan back toward the valley.

"Crackers are all we get now," he told the dog, his own mouth full. "You don't know it, but I've met some unpleasant characters that don't like photographers. We're putting as much distance behind us tonight as we can."

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The pale, frozen light of a winter's day began to show along the eastern horizon. Twenty minutes later the light was strong enough to reveal what had happened to the scattered clouds that had covered last night's moon before it went down. The whole sky was now a surging mass of dark clouds that carried more than a threat of storm. The deep snows were surely not far off.

After another half-hour, Jase stopped to rest and looked ahead toward the ridge beyond which was the big bend of the Mary River. It seemed an incredible distance, and though Jase had known he was traveling slowly, he hadn't thought it was that far. Well, he had reached seemingly unattainable goals before by going at them step by step. Jase strained into the toboggan's rope and kept his eyes on the trail.

There were a surprising number of elk tracks leading off ahead of him. Linus might or might not have been right about elk knowing when storms were due, but a strong advance guard of the herd had evidently gone back into the valley of the Mary already.

Jase passed up one rest stop, then another, and only when his laboring lungs seemed incapable of drawing another breath did he finally halt. Now the summit was less than fifty yards away, and Jase heaved a tired sigh of relief. From far down it had seemed hopeless even to try getting here. But here he was.

"Buckles," he grumbled, "why aren't you an Eskimo dog, so *you* could drag this blasted toboggan? I've had it."

He swung to look back over the distance he had come, and suddenly became alert. Very far down the trail he saw what he hoped was an elk but knew was a man. Could it be Linus? The figure was too far away to be seen clearly, but it was wearing a dark coat, not Linus' red plaid. Even as he looked, Jase thought he knew the right answer. One of the meat hunters was on his trail! His weariness forgotten, Jase all but sprinted up the rest of the ridge.

As he reached the summit, the first light snow began to fall.

## chapter nine

# *Hunter and Hunted*

Jase stifled his urge to keep running. Tired as he was, exhausting himself further would only increase the odds against him and already they were heavy enough. He'd just have to find some way to elude the man who hunted him.

He had a momentary wild hope that the snow would stop his pursuer, but the thought died almost as soon as it occurred to him; there just wasn't enough snow. It was coming, but there was no chance of its deepening sufficiently in the next few hours to halt a man on foot. Indeed, since there was no possible way for Jase to avoid leaving tracks, the snow would help the hunter.

The very fact that he was a hunter, Jase decided, had put him on the right trail in the first place and Jase's own blunders had helped. Leaving the tent, he had walked through unbroken snow and clearly indicated that his trail led up-valley; he should have made it appear as though he were going in some other direction, then doubled back. The unmistakable trail where Jase had left the valley, climbed to retrieve his camera, and gone back down again, might not delay a good tracker at all. Similarly, where he had laboriously searched for the toboggan marks at night, and then returned from the pines with Buckles, would be all too clear to an experienced hunter following his trail by daylight. It would lead to the single escape route up the spine and over the ridge into the valley of the Mary.

Jase told himself that he was well ahead of his pursuer, but immediately found that notion cold comfort. Even if he traveled as fast as possible, he'd need several days to make his way up the Mary River and back to the highway.

The steady hum of a plane, invisible in the storm but nonetheless heartening, cheered him momentarily. He had only to build two smoky fires to tell the pilot of that plane that he was in trouble and needed help. Again his confidence faded. Any rescue party would need nearly as much time to get in as Jase would to get out, and if the poaching rifleman caught him first, all Jase's friends would know with any certainty was that he had been in these parts.

The snow continued to fall gently. Light as it was, it formed a rather effective curtain when spread over three or four hundred yards. Jase could

barely distinguish the contour of the top of the ridge where he was and felt that his pursuer was going to have a hard time to find him after all.

Presently the flat summit gave way to the slope that dipped down toward the Mary River. Clinging to the elk trail, Jase started down the slope. Now, rather than strain to pull the toboggan, he must walk to one side and use the draw rope as a snub to keep it from moving too swiftly. He was making better time, but the snow was lessening. Soon it dwindled away to an indifferent pattering-down of scattered flakes that drifted lazily to earth. Jase had his first clear view of the river valley below him.

From the foot of the slope to perhaps three-quarters of a mile upstream, beyond the bend of the river, several herds of elk were foraging. There were none of the scattered animals and small groups that Jase had seen on the migration route. The smallest bunch in sight contained a counted seventeen animals. Though the biggest herd was too far up the valley to be sure of any count, it appeared to be made up of at least forty animals. The sign was easy to read.

With little snow, easy travel, and sufficient forage, there had been no reason previously for the elk to gather in large groups. Now that they sensed the approach of deep snow at any time, the small bunches were gathering into larger units so that, when winter came in earnest, a herd might work cooperatively to keep the trails trampled and free to travel.

The fact that few elk were more than a comparatively short distance up the valley probably meant that none of the returning animals had had time to go farther. But four separate groups that Jase could see had forsaken the grazed-over river valley to linger near the willows, supposedly a food of last resort. If they were already congregating by the willows, with winter scarcely well under way, it was not hard to imagine what their plight would be like before spring.

Jase reached the valley floor, and a little knot of elk foraging nearby raced away. Before they had run a hundred yards they stopped to browse again. Jase knew that they had learned to fear humans, but now they feared hunger infinitely more. They had moved just far enough to insure a reasonable margin of safety before resuming the all-important business of filling their paunches.

Jase glanced back up the trail and his heart missed a beat.

The man he'd seen just once, but whom he'd never doubted still followed him, had left the top of the ridge and started to swing down the trail. He'd closed the distance between himself and Jase by more than half, and being nearer was much easier to see. He wore a dark plaid hunting coat, a wool cap pushed back on his head, and carried a rifle. Though Jase was unable to see his features, he thought he had a red beard. Jase had a strong

suspicion that it was the man called Terry, the leader of the poachers, and the one who had told Matt how to dispose of the snoop young photographer.

Jase felt a rising panic which he promptly stifled. If he was to get out of this, his only chance lay in outwitting the man. It seemed that his pursuer must wear seven-league boots, but Jase calmed himself with the thought that even a fast walker would need at least a half-hour to come from the top of the ridge into the valley.

Then the snow, starting afresh, dropped a feathery curtain between hunter and hunted and Jase could no longer see his pursuer.

“Come on, Buckles!” he said with sudden determination. “He can’t see us now, anyway, and if this snow holds, trailing us will be harder.”

Jase started up the valley at a tired trot. As he strained to move the toboggan faster, he tried to recall some hiding place, some concealed canyon or cave that he might have noted on his way down and where he might hope to elude pursuit. He could remember no such refuge, and even if he could find one, in this new snow it would be impossible to avoid leaving tracks to its very door. At intervals he looked behind him. Even though he saw nothing except falling snow and an occasional bunch of elk partly hidden by snow, he knew that the figure behind him was coming steadily on. However, Jase told himself, he hadn’t been caught yet.

Finally able to go no farther without a rest, Jase halted near the bank of the frozen Mary River. As he looked out over the snow-covered ice, he began to feel that he remembered this spot; it was familiar because it was attached to some significant event. Then he knew.

On his downward journey, he’d stood within a few feet of where he was now and watched three cow elk run across the frozen river. Then one had suddenly plunged through the freak formation of thin ice and been carried to its death. Jase’s hopes rose as a plan came to him.

He undid the lashings on the toboggan, threw back the tarp, and dumped the contents of his knapsack on it. First he transferred every waterproof container of film to the knapsack. That done, he gave serious thought to choosing food parcels that offered maximum nutrition for their weight and bulk, and stuffed them in the knapsack. He added all his raisins and chocolate, and even a sack of Buckles’ dog meal. Jase topped his pack with a small skillet and a boiling pan, then strapped up the bulging knapsack.

Taking his snowshoes out of the load on the toboggan, he repacked everything else and lashed the tarp in place. He thrust his snowshoes far enough beneath the tarp lashing to hold them, caught up the draw rope, and started toward the river.

At the edge of the ice he halted, and studied the snow that shrouded the frozen Mary. Here and there was a drift, but for the most part the wind had

swept the ice clean and left little more than a dusting of snow. It was hard to imagine that the surface might be treacherous, and if Jase had not watched the elk plunge through thin ice, he would be sure the river's surface was frozen solidly from bank to bank. Indeed, now that the shell of ice was re-frozen and snow had again covered it, there was not the slightest hint as to where the thin ice lay concealed. He must know, for if he did not, the chances were excellent that he himself would follow the drowned elk down the Mary.

Ordering Buckles to stay by the toboggan, he went downstream to a willow thicket, cut a thick shoot with his belt axe, and trimmed off its branches. Concealing the cut branches in the willow thicket, Jase walked backward to the toboggan, brushing out his tracks with his cap as best he could.

Then he ventured out onto the surface of the river; walking slowly, pounding the ice ahead of him with the willow as he advanced. He was only a few yards from shore when the willow plunged through snow, cracked thin ice, and left a creeping seepage of water in its wake. Jase remained in his tracks, and cautiously continued to tap about until he was convinced that the ice upon which he stood was strong enough to bear his weight. Satisfied, he used his willow to pound hard again, and continued to hammer with it until he'd opened a three-foot hole in the ice. Dark, swirling water eddied about in the hole. Jase pushed his willow pole into the hole and let go of it. The pole circled once, then disappeared, sucked under the ice by the current.

Returning to shore, Jase stripped off his coat belt and fastened it through Buckles' collar. Snubbing the dog up short, he picked up the toboggan's draw rope.

"No running around now, Buckles," he told the dog. "Our tracks are going to lead right to that hole and nowhere else."

As they advanced across the ice, Jase was careful to drag the toboggan across the tracks he had previously made. When they came to the hole, Jase stepped carefully to one side, held Buckles firmly with one hand, and with the other shoved the toboggan forward until the curved front end overhung the edge of the broken ice. He pulled his snowshoes from under the lashings on the tarp and tucked them under his left arm.

Still holding Buckles on a short leash, he stooped and started backing toward the willow thicket on the downstream side. Again removing his cap, he used it to brush out their tracks. He knew that at best it was an amateurish job, one that would never confound a master tracker. But it was the best Jase could do under hurried circumstances, and there were factors in his favor. Maybe his pursuer was not a master tracker. Even if he was, and came to the hole in the ice with the toboggan hanging over it, he would naturally

conclude that both Jase and Buckles had fallen into the river. At least Jase hoped he would. Finally, the still-falling snow would assist materially in covering the remains of the tracks Jase had tried to brush out.

Reaching the willows, Jase tossed in his snowshoes. He dragged Buckles in after them, tied his improvised leash to a willow trunk, and crawled back to where he could peer out at the river. They were as safe in the thick willows as they could hope to be elsewhere. Jase broke a willow branch to give him a better field of vision, then another so that he might get his camera into action.

Buckles, unable to move about and taking a very dim view of such proceedings, wriggled and whined. Jase turned around and clamped his hand firmly on the dog's muzzle. It was a signal for quiet he had taught the Airedale before when waiting to photograph wildlife. Buckles quieted at once, and Jase turned his eyes back to the opening in the willows. He removed his camera from its case and activated the heating pads by putting a little snow in each. Then, afraid that his red hunting coat would be too visible, even in the thicket, he took it off and knelt on it.

After a few minutes the cold began to reach him. Then a willow stub dug into his ribs, and he moved slightly. Time dragged by interminably with nothing to break the monotony. Just as Jase decided that he'd have to get up and stretch, he saw, through the lightly falling snow, a figure approaching the river bank. Although he had not seen Terry clearly the night he had been a prisoner in the tent, he felt sure that's who this man was. In any event, it was the same red-bearded poacher he and Linus had seen first after the elk had been shot.

Terry—if Terry it was—walked to the very edge of the river, where he stood perfectly still, rifle cradled in both arms, peering intently at the toboggan out on the ice. Falling snow swirled about him but there was enough visibility for Jase to film an identifying shot of him.

Presently, and carefully, Terry edged out on the frozen river, Jase filming every step. As he approached the toboggan, Jase's pursuer went more and more slowly, testing the ice. He stood a moment, looking at the hole, then stooped and lifted the rear of the toboggan. As the front end dipped into the water, the meat hunter gave a hard shove. The toboggan teetered on the edge of the ice, then surged forward and disappeared. After another look, Terry turned around, retraced his steps across the ice, and went back the way he had come. His figure was soon lost to sight in the still-falling snow.

To be perfectly sure that the poacher wasn't coming back, Jase let twenty minutes pass before he loosed Buckles and left the willows. He found the meat hunter's rapidly filling tracks, heading back up the slope, and followed a little ways.



Terry was gone, convinced that Jase and Buckles had drowned in the river.

## chapter ten

# *New Arrivals*

Jase sat in his hut, a makeshift structure consisting of heaped-up snow walls, a willow-thatched roof covered with more snow, and a respectable pile of wood within easy reach. Gathering that wood had been a major undertaking.

In what remained of the day after Terry left, Jase had built his camp. His first attempts to warm his winter home had melted the snow on the roof. Then he had hit on the idea of building his fire just outside the entrance, with a willow screen behind it to reflect heat. That had been more successful.

After building his shelter, Jase had prowled the valley of the Mary looking for fallen branches or driftwood before they became hopelessly hidden beneath the snow. When he found a chunk he could carry, he wrenched, kicked, or chopped it loose from its frozen bed and took it to camp. Except for building a single all's-well signal fire which the plane might or might not have seen through the falling snow, Jase had spent all his spare time collecting wood. And he had had a lot of spare time.

Now, as Jase sat and stared at the small fire at the entrance of his hut, he thought wistfully of the loaded toboggan. Undoubtedly Terry had shoved it under the ice so it would be swept away after their supposedly drowned bodies, but Jase had not anticipated that. It had occurred to him that the poacher might rifle it of what he could carry and abandon the rest. That's why Jase had taken out only what he might normally be expected to carry in a knapsack. If he'd known Terry was going to shove the toboggan into the river without looking at it, he could have hidden all his equipment—at least his sleeping bag and food—and substituted brush and rocks under the tarpaulin. Well, he hadn't known, so he'd have to make do with what he had.

Buckles wandered to the opening of Jase's hut and peered in. The Airedale hadn't found any chickarees to chase but had discovered that countless mice tunneled beneath the snow. Always resourceful, and never willing to call anything quits, Buckles had worked out a method of hunting mice. This consisted of snuffling the snow's surface until he found a tunnel. Having located one, he snuffed along it until he smelled a mouse. Then he plunged his head through snow into the tunnel and snapped his jaws. So far he hadn't caught one mouse, but in Buckles' philosophy failure was no reason to stop trying.

Having just returned from another hunt, the Airedale's bristled face was snow-covered, but his beaming eyes and wagging tail showed no discouragement.

Jase chuckled. "Hello, man's best friend. You'd better learn to catch mice pretty soon, or you're going to get mighty hungry."

Buckles veered around the fire, came all the way in, and sat down beside his master. Jase extended a hand to ruffle the dog's ears, and debated his double problem: elk for his documentary film and food for himself and Buckles.

The food problem was clear enough, even though the solution wasn't. With his toboggan lost, he now had a grubstake that would be scorned by a ten-year-old boy on an overnight camp in the back yard. Something had to be done about that. Of course he could light two distress fires and, while waiting to be rescued, set deadfalls for rabbits or maybe even an elk. But he didn't want to signal for help; he wanted to photograph the great herd of elk that supposedly wintered here.

Where was it? While he had been gathering his wood he had taken a rough census of elk in the river valley. Though an accurate count was impossible, he had estimated that there were about a hundred and sixty. Perhaps fifty more had returned since—say two hundred in all. What had happened to the rest?

Linus had told him that about fifteen hundred elk, and possibly more had come down the valley of the Mary, climbed the slope, traveled the spiny plateau, and descended into the low hills whose sloping valleys should have led them to a winter haven at Taborville. The tracks Jase himself had seen bore out this much of the Indian's statement.

Was all the rest of it false?

According to Linus, two-thirds or more of this great herd, surviving the attacks of both the Indians and the commercial meat hunters, returned to winter—and starve—here in the river valley. This was the herd Jase wanted to film in winter quarters, to add to his documentary as positive evidence. This herd should number a thousand or more animals, but he could find only a couple of hundred.

Jase stared glumly out the opening of his hut. In his mind's eye rose a vision of Indians and meat hunters killing vast numbers of elk, since there was no one to interfere. Here he was, the only person in the Conservation Department who knew the situation, crouching in a makeshift snow hut. Maybe he didn't even know the real situation. Was it possible that Linus had deliberately misled him, focused his attention on Terry's meat hunters and told him about the elk wintering here in the river valley, just to distract him from the Indians' own activities?

He didn't really believe it. Linus might have skipped back to his village, but there was no doubt about his story that some elk, at least, had returned to the valley of the Mary. Furthermore, the really deep snows he had said forced the elk back hadn't come yet. Jase would wait until they did, see and photograph what elk did return, and then make his own plans for getting back to civilization.

Tired of thinking, and even more tired of his cramped position in the tiny hut, Jase got stiffly to his feet. Buckles rose with him, and regarded his master with eager eyes. Jase shouldered his camera case.

"Come on, Buckles. Let's go see what we can find."

The Airedale close behind, Jase ducked through the door of his hut, kicked snow on his fire, and stood a moment. The north wind, steady and cold but not really uncomfortable, blew exactly as it had for the past three days. The cloud-ridden sky looked the same, the snow was still lightly crusted. The frozen river, the willows along its banks, the mountains that rose to the east, and even the elk that were foraging in the valley seemed part of an old and very familiar scene. Jase thought wryly that he was like a suburbanite who has lived in the same house for several years, and who knows exactly what he'll see from his front porch.

Buckles ventured off, found an enticing mouse tunnel, followed along it until he smelled a mouse, and buried his entire head beneath the snow as he grabbed for it. As usual he made no kill, but the canine grin he wore when he raised his head was proof enough that he had enjoyed trying.

Jase looked around at the scattered groups of feeding elk. Time, and the fact that they were unmolested here made them almost as tame as the first herd that Jase had followed out of the Park. The animals were moving about freely, unhampered by the snow, but they did seem to be working harder for food. That was probably because so much of the best forage in the valley had already been consumed.

He already had on film plenty of scenes such as he was seeing now, and it seemed a waste of time to go up the valley again. Besides, with his larder as low as it was, he wanted to locate some likely looking rabbit runs. He turned south, toward the big bend of the river, Buckles scouting along first on one side of him, then the other.

As he approached the bend, motion on the river brought him to a sudden stop.

Four or five hundred yards away, eleven great gray wolves trotted across the frozen river, emerged from the willows on the far side, and continued at right angles to the southward direction in which Jase was traveling. They knew he was there and Jase knew they knew, but they did not hurry. They seemed to sense that the human and dog were too far away to be any threat.

Jase took out his camera, focused his telephoto lens on the lazily traveling pack, and shot a sequence. He knew even before he started shooting that he would not get a good sequence under the hazy light conditions, but that was unimportant. He wanted it for the record, for he was certain that the pack had come into the valley of the Mary to prey on the wintering elk.

As he sheathed his camera again, Jase became aware that there had been a shift in the wind direction. For three days it had blown out of the north, but now it was coming from the east, and was definitely warmer. He glanced up at the sky.

The cloud banks, which, like the wind, had undergone no noticeable change for three days, had begun to shift and roll. They seemed to be trying to turn completely over, with the top layer falling to the bottom and the bottom rising to the top. Long streamers of white dipped below the dark cloud masses. The first large, feathery flakes of snow began drifting lazily down.

Jase halted, turned, and gauged the distance back to his hut. Obviously the long-threatened heavy snows were about to begin, and it might be a good idea not to venture too far from shelter. Then he shrugged and went on. Enough snow wouldn't fall to give him serious trouble within the next hour or two.

Jase was still a quarter-mile from the migration trail leading up the slope when he noticed that the summit of the ridge was suddenly enveloped in a dark shroud. Jase studied it, and decided that the impending storm was already in progress up there. But as he watched, he realized that the dark mass on the top of the ridge was moving.

What at first seemed a spreading, dark-brown cloud but what presently resolved itself into a close-packed herd of elk, was dropping from the plateau into the river valley. Jase didn't move, unable to tear his eyes from this spectacle as the herd continued to pour over the top of the ridge. Here were the missing elk he had been wondering about! Driven by their instinctive knowledge that deep snow was on its way, they were returning to the comparative shelter of the Mary River valley. As they came on and on, hundreds of them, there was something awe-inspiring about their very numbers.

When the herd was near enough for Jase to distinguish individual beasts on the outskirts, and tined antlers thrust above the mass, he removed his camera from its case. Completely the photographer now, Jase knew that getting this picture was all important. Fortunately there was a new film in his camera; all he'd run of it so far was his short sequence of the wolves. His

only concern was the snow. It was falling faster now, and Jase hoped it wouldn't be too thick to obscure his field of vision.

He flicked his telephoto lens into position, set it according to his light meter, sighted on the herd, and began shooting. He used film as though he had a million feet of it left, for getting this herd was a key part of his story as well as a challenging opportunity. Never again did he expect to see anything like it. Stopping only to rewind his camera, he shot until the telephoto would no longer cover the herd, then changed to his wide-angle lens. When he had run off that film, Jase put in another and continued shooting.

Excited by the sight and smell of so many animals, Buckles was running back and forth within a few feet of the herd's outer flank. Jase wondered curiously why the dog, whose sight and scent must surely make the elk think he was some kind of a wolf, did not frighten them. Then he decided that so many could be neither frightened nor turned aside. They had a mass goal and nothing would prevent their reaching it.

Choosing his sequences more carefully now, Jase kept pace with the herd as it traveled up the valley of the Mary. Again he changed film. Finally, when the vanguard of the herd had stopped and the animals had begun to spread out, Jase sheathed his camera and swung away toward his makeshift house.

Enough snow had fallen to hide the thatched willow roof of his hut, and Jase would have had difficulty finding it had not Buckles turned aside and guided him. Jase cleared away the snow at the entrance, built another fire, melted snow water, and set rice to cooking when the water was hot enough. As he watched it bubbling in the pot, he felt that all his worries, even those centered about the scanty store of food remaining, had slipped away.

He had his pictures.

## chapter eleven

# *Snowbound Valley*

Leaping up every few steps so he could see over the snow, Buckles floundered in the furrow left by Jase's snowshoes. Even so, the dog had no trouble keeping up, for in the four feet of soft new snow Jase's webs sank so far that making even reasonable speed demanded a major effort.

Jase maneuvered toward a yard where about fifty elk had beaten their paths and were now prisoners of the snow that surrounded them. As he plowed forward, he reviewed all he'd seen, and filmed, since the great herd returned to the valley of the Mary.

Before the snow had become too deep for them to move around freely, the elk had broken up into bands numbering anywhere from a score of animals to over a hundred. A few of these groups had made their way up side canyons, others had trampled the snow into paths and yards in the open valley, but most of them had sought shelter in the willow thickets along the banks of the river. Even scattered as the groups were, there was not nearly enough forage for so many animals, and some of the weaker ones had already died or been pulled down by wolves.

All this Jase had filmed, and he knew he had a record of tragedy that should stir up some real action when people like Dr. Goodell and Tom Rainse saw his pictures. The tragedy need never be repeated; Jase hoped that this winter would be the last when elk starved in this valley. Even better, if something could be done *now*—

Buckles growled suddenly and Jase jerked his mind back to the present. Like shadows flitting across the snow, he saw a wolf pack, probably the same one he'd seen previously, leaping toward the yarded elk. In this deep snow only the wolves' heads and the tops of their backs showed as they drove forward. The elk wheeled and ran, and with perfect timing the wolves sprang between the fleeing herd and the rearmost cow.

She drew up short and turned to race frantically in the other direction. But there was no place for her to go after she came to the end of the beaten path. Desperately she plowed into the deep snow, but was in trouble at once. The cow must break her own path; the wolves followed in it. Exhausted, gasping for breath, the cow bucked forward through the snow.

Jase shouted at the top of his voice. Not hungry enough to be heedless, the startled wolves gave up the chase. As they turned and fled, the terrified

cow gave a great leap, reared to paw the air with both front hoofs, and collapsed in the snow. Weakened by lack of food, she had literally broken her own heart with a combination of exhaustion, effort, and terror.

Sorry as he had been for the stricken cow, Jase realized that here was an opportunity for fresh meat not to be missed. Keeping a wary eye out for the wolves, he pushed eagerly forward. When he reached the dead elk, Jase trampled a space with his snowshoes, drew his knife, bled her, and severed a haunch. He looked wistfully at the remainder, knowing he should have more meat, but he couldn't carry more. He'd just have to leave the rest to the wolves that had driven the cow from her yard.

Dragging the haunch, Jase started back along the trail he'd broken coming out. On the way he met the panting Buckles, who had been waiting for him, glad of the respite.

"Let's go, Buckles," he said. "I think it's going to snow some more, but at least we've got some grub."

Buckles stood aside to let his master pass, then bounced forward and sniffed with vast interest at the dragging elk haunch. Aside from two rabbit dinners, both dog and master had been living on alternate meals of cornmeal and rice, with now and then a few beans as a special treat. Buckles' philosophy was that when nothing else offered such fare was not to be scorned, but it could never compare with the heavenly delights of red meat. As he kept his nose within inches of the dragging haunch, Buckles' eyes gleamed and his jaws drooled. Tonight he could expect a dinner befitting one who led his kind of a dog's life.

Jase looked back toward the elk yard and saw gray shapes already working their way through the snow to the trampled spot where the dead cow lay. The wolves had only been waiting for him to leave. And when the cow had been eaten, and the wolves grew hungry again, there would be more weakened elk for them to feed on.

Suddenly it occurred to Jase that his films, when seen by the right people, might very well result in food-carrying planes, an aerial haylift, to aid these winterbound herds. Though he knew nothing of the difficulties involved in such a haylift, he did know that even a small amount of additional food might double the number of elk that would live through the winter. For all it would mean less misery and suffering. The very thought that such a haylift might be feasible lifted Jase's spirits.

His thoughts turned to the journey out. To go up the river valley and through the Park the long way he had originally come in would be virtually impossible, particularly with his scanty supply of food. But with the herd now wintered in the valley of the Mary, he was sure the poachers had ceased operations. With them out of the way, he and Buckles could go down the



rocky spines, which would be comparatively free of snow, and make their way through the lower valleys to Taborville. All he could accomplish by staying here longer would be to film progressively tragic shots of starving elk, and the scenes he had were convincing enough to show what was happening.

Jase glanced up to see that they were about fifty yards from the snow house. After the first time he'd found his hut all but hidden beneath new snow, and Buckles had had to guide him, Jase had made himself a guide. He'd chopped a ten-foot willow pole, fastened to it a strip of red lining cut from the inside of his hunting coat, and set the pole upright beside the hut.

Cheered by the sight of the landmark, Jase took a firmer grip on the dragging haunch and stepped briskly forward. Suddenly his right snowshoe and almost the full length of his right leg plunged violently out of sight. There was the sharp crack of breaking wood. With no time to think, Jase reacted instinctively and swung the haunch he had been dragging from the rear to front. Simultaneously he threw himself forward, so that his upper body lay flat on the snow, his left leg stretched straight behind him.

For a space he lay still, blinded by lights that flashed before his eyes and deafened by a roaring inside his head. He was vaguely aware of keeping his grip on the elk leg and knew that he must not let go. The haunch could mean the difference between life and death.

A moment later came a return to full consciousness, and with it a sharp pain in his right foot that spread upward through his calf and thigh. Jase gritted his teeth, fought down the agony that seemed to be centered in his right foot, and turned his head to see what had happened.

He had been walking in the same snowshoe trail he had used on the way out. There had been a sufficient depth of snow to carry his weight then. At the place where his right leg was buried nearly to the hip joint, there must be a hole. Partially beaten down on the first trip, the thin covering of snow over the hole must have given way on the return trip, and Jase had fallen into it. Well, he'd better get out rather than wonder what sort of hole he'd fallen into.

Jase extended his free arm and wrapped his fingers around the shank of the elk haunch until he had a firm grip with both hands. Using the haunch as an anchor, he pulled with his arms and pushed with his left leg. But he only pulled the haunch toward him and increased the agony in his right leg. Jase pressed his perspiring head against the snow and lay still.

A misshapen little imp with a horrible grin and evil eyes appeared before him, and Jase somehow knew that this same ogre had chortled in devilish glee at all the men who'd ever found themselves far from help and in

trouble. He shut his eyes against the devil, and when he still saw it, he knew that it was a creation of his own mind. He opened his eyes again.

He told himself that he wasn't afraid, but at the same time he knew that he was frightened as he had never been before. He couldn't get out, and there was nobody to help him, nobody that knew of his plight except Buckles. Buckles! Where was he?

Knowing that they were on their way to the hut, the Airedale had floundered on ahead in the old snowshoe trail. Looking very puzzled, for never before had he seen Jase do anything like this, Buckles was sitting on his haunches a few feet up the trail, staring back at his master. For a moment Jase looked at the dog, thinking.

"Come here, Buckles," he ordered, slipping off his right mitten and snapping his fingers. Woebegone because Jase was in trouble but not knowing what to do about it, the big Airedale came slowly forward and licked Jase's bare hand. Jase ruffled the dog's ears, then carefully worked his fingers under Buckles' collar, getting a firm grip. With his left hand Jase pushed the shank of the elk haunch toward Buckles and with his right twisted the dog's head slightly toward the meat.

Buckles didn't know what was going on, but couldn't resist the smell of meat so temptingly near. He sniffed the shank, looked at Jase as if asking permission, and reached out for a tentative bite.

The instant the dog's teeth closed on the shank, Jase swatted him and yelled right in his face.

Startled, his feelings hurt, Buckles immediately leapt backward with all his strength. Hanging grimly to the dog's collar, and doing all he could to help himself, Jase momentarily forgot his pain in the effort to struggle forward. Then he was free. Letting Buckles go, Jase again pressed his sweating face against the snow. When his nausea subsided, he raised his head, opened his eyes, and turned to survey the damage. A horrified gasp escaped him.

The snowshoe frame was broken in half on either side of his pac, and that alone spelled disaster. Without snowshoes, he couldn't possibly get around in this snowbound wilderness, even if there was nothing wrong with his right foot. For a full minute, Jase stared unbelievably, then he gritted his teeth and rose to a sitting position. Steeling himself against pain, he drew his right foot up and looked again at the broken snowshoe. The tail was also nearly broken through, and there were other cracks and splinters in the frame.

The snowshoe was hopeless, but the situation wasn't.

Jase drew his knife, cut away the frozen harness, and let the useless snowshoe fall away from his pac. He considered cutting off and throwing

away the remaining snowshoe, but decided against it. Though he couldn't walk on one snowshoe, if nothing else he could use it as a shovel. He retrieved his right mitten and put it on. Again dragging the haunch of elk, he wriggled to a nearby bush and pulled himself erect. He discovered that he was unable to stand on his right foot. He resumed his wriggling, throwing an anxious glance at the sky.

Storm clouds were gathering. Fresh snow couldn't be far off, but Jase did his best not to think about it. He had a plan, but it would fail should there be another heavy snowfall soon.

Looking at his watch, Jase discovered that he had about an hour and a half before the Mountain Airways plane would be due on its southward journey. Since his return to the valley of the Mary he had sent his regular signals right from the front of his snow house, so the pilot would certainly take a look when he flew over today. This time there would be *two* smoky fires to tell Pete Johnson that Jase was in trouble. And somehow he would survive until help arrived.

As he crawled on toward the hut, a myriad of red-hot needles seemed to jab ceaselessly at his right foot. The snow house, fifty yards away just before the accident, appeared to retreat rather than draw nearer. Jase felt that he had been crawling for hours, and that he must work frantically if there was still to be time enough to send his signal. However, when he finally reached the hut, he discovered that the plane was still not due for well over an hour.

Entering the snow house, Jase found Buckles crouched disconsolately at the back. In spite of his pain and worry, Jase had to chuckle.

"No hard feelings, old man," Jase told him, patting the bristly head. "I had to do it, and you'll get a hunk of that elk meat yet."

In spite of his reproachful looks Buckles cheered up, and Jase went back to his own problems. First he untied the harness on his remaining snowshoe, and cast it aside. Then, trying his best not to notice the pain, he unlaced and removed his right pac. He unrolled his two pairs of wool socks and bent to examine his injured foot.

The entire ankle and part of the foot had turned an ugly bluish-purple, and purple streaks extended farther down the foot and up the calf. Jase started to probe with exploring fingers, winced, then grimly completed his examination. There were no broken bones, but definitely there was a serious sprain. For all the chance of traveling on the foot, even with two sound snowshoes, the sprain might as well have been a multiple fracture.

He replaced both pairs of socks, looked speculatively at the pac, and decided against putting it back on. To do so would be painful and not really

serve any useful purpose. He was not going anywhere, he thought wryly, at least for the present.

Jase started a fire in front of his entrance, threw wood on it, and even before the fire began to warm up the hut, started skinning the elk haunch. The wet and sticky skin he cut in half. Then he sliced off a chunk of meat and gave it to Buckles as a peace offering. The delighted Airedale, all grudges forgotten, promptly stretched out to enjoy his feast.

Dragging both pieces of the sticky hide, as well as the remainder of the meat, in case Buckles might be tempted to try more samples, Jase crawled back outside. He glanced again at the sky, where dark cloud formations were piling up, and felt a little chill of apprehension as he noted that the wind was pulling around to the east.

Despite the cold, pain brought a fine mist of sweat to his face. Taking off his shoe had brought relief, but to put any weight on his swollen foot was agony. Jase remembered one time, years ago, when he had decided to find out how it felt to walk bare-footed on snow. After the first shrinking contact, both his feet had become too numb to feel anything. It might work again. Jase peeled the socks from his injured foot and rested it gingerly in the snow. It did work. The foot still throbbed but the pain lessened so that he could hobble about.

Shoveling a path with the one remaining snowshoe, Jase carried a quarter of his carefully hoarded wood supply fifty feet from the fire he had already started by the entrance to his hut. He would need hot fires to burn the elk skin enough to send up good smoke signals. Jase scraped down to the ground with his snowshoe, shaved kindling and carefully piled wood on it. His second fire ready, Jase looked at his watch. Half an hour until the plane was due; too soon to light the fire. He left half the elk skin by the pile of wood and hobbled back to the hut.

Less than five minutes before he started his second fire, the snowstorm began.

At first a desultory flight of feathery flakes, the storm built up so fast that within minutes it had hidden the old snow beneath a new layer of purest white. Jase refused to be discouraged; from the ground you couldn't tell how far you might be able to see smoke in the air. In any event, he dared not burn the rest of his wood for it would be impossible to gather more until the storm ended, which might not be for days.

Presently, faint in the distance and seemingly further muffled by the snow, he heard the plane's motors. As he hobbled to his farther fire, he listened tensely. The sound was coming nearer. He threw on one of the pieces of the elk skin, then returned to the fire by the hut and put on the other piece. He looked up.

The furiously burning fires were sending leaping flames out from under the edges of the smoldering elk skins, and two plumes of dense black smoke were rising, fifty feet apart. But to Jase the falling snow seemed to be just as dense as the columns of smoke. How far could they be seen?

Eyes pleading and heart hopeful, Jase listened while the plane seemed to pass directly overhead. He followed the sound of its motors as it went on, and felt that it must surely come back, surely circle as a sign that that smoke had been seen. Only after the sound died in the distance and was heard no more did Jase admit that his distress signal had failed.

The fires continued to burn, but Jase did not see them as he crawled back into his snow house. He did see that the storm was lessening as fast as it had begun, but that did little good now. He could try again on a clear day, but that would take the rest of his wood. Without snowshoes and with a badly sprained ankle, how could he gather more wood? He'd freeze to death before help could get to him. Completely discouraged, he was seized by despair and no longer had the will to fight it. All he wanted to do was sleep, not for just one night but for days and weeks, as the dened bears did in their caves.

Jase scarcely noticed when Buckles leaped erect, pricked his ears up, and bounced to the opening, whining softly. Not until the legs and lower body of a man were outlined against the fire outside did Jase rouse from his lethargy. The man stooped, looked in, and Jase saw his face.

"Linus!" he gasped.

The Indian squatted down in the opening. "What are you doing here, Jase? Are you hurt?"

"Just a sprained ankle. But if you hadn't come it might as well have been two broken legs! What brought you out of nowhere?"

"I was setting wolf traps when I saw your fires. What are you trying to do—melt all the snow in the valley?"

Jase grinned weakly. "Hardly. Fires were my signal to the plane that flies over here every day. One smoky fire means that I'm all right. Two fires mean that I'm in trouble, and to let the Conservation Department know about it."

"You *were* in trouble," Linus corrected, "but you aren't any longer. Let me look at that ankle of yours."

Jase winced as Linus pulled off the socks and inspected the hurt ankle. The Indian took out his neckerchief and bound up the foot, which brought some relief.

"You won't be walking for a while," Linus said. "It's a good thing you don't have to run away from the meat hunters now."

“You said it,” Jase agreed fervently. “Say, whatever happened to you back there?”

“Didn’t you tell him, Buckles?” Linus asked, scratching the dog’s ears. “Well I made it to the toboggan and when you didn’t show up I turned Buckles loose. I tried to get him to come with me, but he wouldn’t leave the toboggan. I went back, saw where the meat hunters caught up with you and carried you down the hill. I figured I’d get you out that night, but there was a bright moon and they saw me. I did manage to knock the guard out, then I had to run.”

“And I thought he was just asleep!” Jase said. “I did hear some sort of commotion, but didn’t know what it was. No wonder it seemed so easy to get away.”

“I went back later,” Linus went on, “after the moon had waned. I could tell by the way they were running around—they all but turned the place upside down—that you had escaped. Naturally I figured you’d pick up your dog and then hit out for Taborville. Since the meat hunters didn’t know about Buckles, or that you’d go back for him, I knew that as soon as it was light they’d look for your trail going toward Taborville. So, to confuse them, I spent a couple of hours making the fanciest sets of tracks you ever saw—dozens of them. Then, just before daylight, I went back to the toboggan, found it and Buckles gone, and was sure I was right. But I guess I wasn’t. What *did* you do?”

Jase laughed at Linus’ ruse of making so many confusing tracks, then ruefully told of his own blunder in leaving tracks from the tent that Terry could easily follow. He described all that had happened since, including his filming of the desperate plight of the winterbound elk.

When Jase had finished, Linus looked at him levelly.

“Well, now that you have the whole story on film, what do you think of the Indian part of it?”

“You know what I think,” Jase said indignantly. “Maybe you’ve broken the law, technically, but anybody would do the same in your situation. It’s the meat hunters who are doing the real killing and causing all this starvation—”

“That’s all I wanted to know,” Linus interrupted. “Now, the important thing is to get you and your films back to the Conservation Department. You sit tight. I’ll build up your fire and then go back to the village for help and a toboggan.”

“But I thought—”

“You’ll be all right in the village,” Linus assured him. “I’ve convinced my people that as long as the whole story is known, the Conservation

Department will see things the way you do—I hope. We’ll get you to the village and signal the plane from there tomorrow.”

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His back against one of the Indian cabins, Buckles by his side, Jase sat in the sun and watched the two signal fires sending their long columns of smoke into a cloudless sky. He heard the plane, watched it come nearer and nearer, saw it bank and circle, then dip its wings and resume its flight.

“Guess that does it,” Jase told Linus. “He’s probably on his radio right now. And I have a hunch that the search party will be headed by Tom Rainse.”

“Friend of yours?”

“The best. He knows about your village, and is one of the smartest—and fairest—game wardens in the state. His opinion carries a lot of weight in the Conservation Department, and if he sees this situation for himself, things will begin to happen before my films are even developed. My guess is that the first thing will be a haylift.”

“Haylift?”

“Flying baled hay in by plane and dropping it for the elk, to keep them going through the rest of the winter.”

Linus looked puzzled. “But how would the elk get to the hay? With this deep snow, they can’t get out of their yards.”

“No, but the hay could be carried to their yards.” Jase grinned. “For instance, by Indians with toboggans. For pay.”

“I think it could be arranged,” Linus said with a quiet smile.

“There’s another thing I thought about while I was waiting for you,” Jase went on. “These elk have been turned back by poachers before—at least some of the older animals have. Even if there weren’t any poachers, wouldn’t part of the herd winter in the valley of the Mary anyway?”

“Probably; elk are creatures of habit. Why?”

“Then they’ll need someone to look after them *every* winter: protect them from wolves and meat hunters, supervise feeding them during deep snows, and all that. I hope it turns out to be someone who’s had experience in finding snowbound photographers!”

THE END

## *About the Author*

*Jim Kjelgaard's first book was FOREST PATROL (1941), based on the wilderness experiences of himself and his brother, a forest ranger. Since then he has written many others—all of them concerned with the out-of-doors. BIG RED, IRISH RED, and OUTLAW RED are dog stories about Irish setters. KALAK OF THE ICE (a polar bear) and CHIP, THE DAM BUILDER (a beaver) are wild-animal stories. SNOW DOG and WILD TREK describe the adventures of a trapper and his half-wild dog. HAUNT FOX is the story both of a fox and of a dog and boy who trailed him, and STORMY is concerned with a wildfowl retriever and his young owner. FIRE-HUNTER is a story about prehistoric man; BOOMERANG HUNTER about the equally primitive Australian aborigine. REBEL SIEGE and BUCKSKIN BRIGADE are tales of American frontiersmen, and WOLF BROTHER presents the Indian side of "the winning of the West." The cougar-hunting LION HOUND and the greyhound story, DESERT DOG, are laid in the present-day Southwest. A NOSE FOR TROUBLE and TRAILING TROUBLE are adventure mysteries centered around a game warden and his man-hunting bloodhound. The same game warden also appears in WILDLIFE CAMERAMAN and this sequel, HIDDEN TRAIL.*



# HIDDEN TRAIL

*By JIM KJELGAARD*

How could more than a thousand elk disappear on a migration from summer to winter feeding grounds? Did they get lost and starve, were they killed by natural or human enemies, or did they just find their way to some unknown spot?

In a search for possible answers, the Conservation Department sent its young photographer, Jase Mason, into the wilds of Whitestone National Park. With only his big Airedale for company, Jase was to follow the herd, make a movie documentary of the migration, and find out what he could about the missing elk. He solved the mystery, but only through courage and perseverance in the face of dangerous risks.

Conservation and adventure are natural companions, and no one can combine them with a surer hand than Jim Kjelgaard. In this tense, fact-based story, he dramatically points up to young readers the modern relationship between man and the wild creatures that are now in his charge.

# TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.  
Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.  
A cover was created for this eBook.

[The end of *Hidden Trail* by Jim Kjelgaard]