Chapter Three
A Banff Encounter

In 1976, fifteen months after that encounter with the bull at the zoo, in the second week of December, I had just returned to my office when Marie, the secretary of the large animal clinic, called.

She said, "There's a Dr. Bim Hopf on the line from Calgary who wants to speak to you."

"Hello, is that Dr. Haigh? I'm Bim Hopf, the vet here at the Calgary Zoo. I wonder if you can help me with a problem. Our bull elk, who is a favourite with our visitors, was shot and killed with a crossbow by someone after work hours two days ago."

"What a bastard. How did he get close enough to use a crossbow?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, the elk enclosure is just a few yards from the zoo boundary fence. A road runs right alongside it, so for the shooter, it would have been an easy target. We assumed he must have planned it and then come along after closing time. We have no idea why he did it and no way of finding out who it was. The director has been given permission by the authorities in Banff National Park to capture a replacement."

"Great. How can I help?"

"Well, I have some of that immobilizing opioid, M99, in stock, but I've never used it," he said. "I gather that you have extensive experience with it for the capture of African species. Is there any chance you could come over and help?"

I had indeed used it on species that included horses, elephants, rhinos, and several kinds of antelope.

"It's dangerous stuff," I told him. "Way more potent than morphine — at least 10,000 times. A rhino dose is enough to kill over 500 people. I hope you have some of the antidote in case some ends up in one of us."

There was a seat available on the morning flight, so I called Brent to tell him of a slight change of plans. By ten o'clock, Bim and I were enjoying a cup of tea in the Calgary Zoo canteen and discussing the steps we needed to take. We hitched a livestock trailer to the zoo's half-ton truck and were soon on our way to Banff, an hour or so west of the city. The view of the snow-capped Rocky Mountains reminded me of Mt. Kenya, which we had been able to see every morning from our bedroom window.

The road started to rise toward the foothills, well before the mountains, where five bull elk stood at the side of the road on a wide patch of open ground dotted with a few spruce trees. There was a skiff of snow over the grass, and the spruce trees had a light covering of white on their branches, making them look a bit Christmassy. A brown-coloured half ton with the Parks Canada logo on the door — a beaver inside a circle — was parked not far from the animals.

Now, this late in the year, the rut over, there wasn't a cow in sight, and the bulls had no interest in competition. They still carried hard antlers that would last well into the new year. They were just hanging out, an elk equivalent of coffee row. They weren't the slightest bit worried about the two trucks and the cars that pulled up to have a look-see and snap pictures. Tourists stopping to take photos and admire them were a year-round part of the price of living in paradise, where there was no risk of hunters going after them, and there was abundant food in the form of grasses to eat and bushes to browse upon.

Bim pulled over, and we got out to be greeted by a couple of uniformed wardens wearing Stetson hats, part of the Canada Parks uniform. After introductions all around, Perry Jacobsen, a stocky dark-

haired man, told us that he was the designated shooter. His duties in animal control involved the capture of nuisance bears in town and at campgrounds.

“This is a first for me,” he said. “It’ll be interesting to watch.”

Bim opened the box containing the darting equipment and the hard case holding the dart gun. He asked me to suggest a dose for the animal.

I had been thinking about this ever since Bim’s call and reckoned that a mature bull was a bit smaller than the dun-coloured eland, the largest African antelope I’d worked with in Kenya. The best thing I could think of was to use the dose for an almost full-grown eland.

I had one more concern because, in Saskatoon, I’d found out that a dose for a 220-pound whitetail was the same as that for a one-and-a-half-ton rhino. It seemed completely unreasonable, but I’d learned it the hard way when I’d tried to immobilize the deer with a logical dose based on weight. He’d shown some excitement, pacing up and down the fence a few times, but nothing more — no sign of staggering or looking as if he was about to fall over, which I expected.

The most obvious explanation for the odd result was that the two creatures, one from Africa, the other from North America, had very different metabolic systems or opioid receptors in the brain.

Here, the question in my mind was whether the elk and the eland had the same or different dosage needs. There was just one way to find out. I had a small feeling of comfort because if the dose was too high and the animal’s breathing looked as if it was going to stop, I knew the antidote would soon reverse the problem.

I also knew that animals recovering from the effects of the M99 on their own could struggle, thrash, and even injure themselves while they recovered. So, I suggested to Bim that we add a small amount of cattle sedative to control this effect. In for a penny, in for a pound.

Careful not to inject myself, I filled the dart with the lethal cocktail and screwed on the needle.

Perry crept up behind a tree and, at about 30 yards, fired at the nearest bull. In the crisp, still air, we heard a slight crack as the blank charge from the gun went off and, at once, saw the metal dart sticking out of the elk’s rump. He didn’t approve, jumped, and moved about 10 yards before putting his head down for another bite.

For just over eight minutes, I watched with concern as nothing much happened. I was starting to think about a second dart when he stumbled and righted himself. Then he swayed and took three uncoordinated steps. His rear end started to drop. He made a few more drunken movements, then squatted, collapsed, rolled over onto his side, and lay still.

A drugged bull elk in Banff National Park. With only 5 tines a side, it is a 2-year-old, known in North America as a raghorn.

We all ran up to him, and I pulled out my stethoscope to check his heart and breathing, which were both fine. At least I hadn't overdosed him.

Meanwhile, Bim moved to his head and began to lift his antlers to an upright position. We both knew the important thing was to get the animal up onto his brisket and make sure that no food would come up and get sucked into his lungs, which would create serious and fatal pneumonia. Perry and the other warden at once joined in the lift, and the elk was soon sitting up, his legs tucked under him, resembling a modern version of the Egyptian Sphinx, his head held proud, looking off into the distance in disdain.

Whether this creature could see anything was quite a different matter, but that famous statue beside the Nile couldn't have.

With brute force (but no ignorance), we heaved and shoved the 400 kg (880 lb.) body into the trailer and closed the tailgate. The risk of leaving him on his side for an hour, which could lead to bloating, was too great to take. From plenty of African experience, I knew that having an animal standing in the dark, where it would not be subjected to much outside stimulus, was the best option. The same applies to animals that have not been drugged.

I didn't need to mention this to Bim; it was something we both knew. He entered through the side door near the front of the trailer, syringe of antidote in hand, and came out again less than a minute later.

Soon afterward, we heard bumping and banging from the trailer. I climbed up onto the fender and looked through the ventilation slits near the top, designed to let air circulate. After a little more noise as his antlers hit the metal walls, he stood, somewhat groggy, shook himself, and acted as if he hadn't a care in the world. All was well; I needn't have worried. The antidote and cattle sedative had done their job.

Back in Calgary, after taking one look out the trailer door, the elk stepped out into his new home.

It was too late for me to catch the last flight home, so Bim invited me to spend the night at his house, where I met his charming wife and the three of us enjoyed a good meal with a beer chaser followed by a game of darts in the basement.

On the plane, I wondered about antlers and how they varied according to season. On my first visit in May, the big bull in Saskatoon had soft, two-foot-long antlers with branches and rounded tips. In that memorable first working visit in September, when he was crazed and dangerous, they were hard, sharp, and over twice as long. Four months later, he was calm, with hard antlers but no sign of aggression.

It was time to learn more. Like most learning, it's an ongoing process.