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THE BANDERSNATCH BEAST OF TAZLINA LAKE

AND OTHER

ALASKA GOLD RUSH STORIES

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THE BANDERSNATCH BEAST OF TAZLINA LAKE

"It was Alfred St. Claire and his twin brother Jake who had captured the Monster of Tazlina Lake or at least so they said in the Oogrook Saloon as the last of October brought on the gloom of the coming of winter with twenty-foot snows and the howl of the wind as southward it blows.

"Caught in Cache Creek as the winter closed in the two men were up to their eyeballs in gin they'd been buying on credit from Eskimo Sam who demanded they balance their debt with gold sand. The twin brothers were caught 'tween fire and pan with no choice and no credit but to pull off a scam.

"Now I'm tellin' ya, Sam," swore Alfred St. Claire, that sure as there's taxes that we're on the square. We'll pay off our credit soon's we get the cash from selling the furs we've got hid in our cache.' Eskimo Sam, not born just that day, said only one word and that word was 'pay.'

"Now listen here, Sam,' said Jake in a fit, 'it's ain't that we're broke. No, not one bit. It's just that we're short this particular week just wait a few days for the gold dust you seek. So be a good sport and pass the whiskey, eh?' Eskimo Sam still insisted they pay.

"It was suddenly clear to Alfred and Jake that their days of freeloading here were at stake so Alfred began, with his forked, silver tongue, to sweet talk the owner out of his whiskey and rum for a week, maybe less, 'til their fortunes would change Eskimo Sam had but one word to say: 'pay.'

"Then Alfred said, 'Sam, I've a confession to make but Jake here and I have one hell of a stake in a bonafide bit of a traveling show that we've got out in a cave hidden by snow. It's the Bandersnatch Monster of Tazlina Lake and I swear to you a fortune we'll make.'

"Alfred's mind was spinnin' as fast as his tongue
 or the hands of a gambler when he's on a run
 and he spun such a tale he believed it himself
 in spite of the fact that he was baiting with stealth
 the most marvelous scheme he'd ever engaged
 as long as it was most carefully staged.

"'I swear that it's true,' he whispered to Sam,
 'that this Bandersnatch creature is not just a scam.
 He's nasty and mean, stands seven feet tall,
 can strip a man to the bone when it chooses to maul.
 His legs are as thick as ham hocks in spring
 and his fingers and toes are fashioned to cling.'

"Now Jake was not dumb and as Alfred spoke
 he jumped into the fray and added his smoke.
 'That Bandersnatch demon from Tazlina Lake
 been chompin' down muckers like *cheechakers* eat steak.
 He'll rip out your liver with razor sharp claws
 and feast on your gizzard bloody and raw.'

"'He's a devil, I swear it,' said Alfred in fear,
 'and he's chained in a cave not that far from here.
 We were plannin' on showin' 'em down Seward way
 but seein' you want us to balance and pay,
 may we make a suggestion to bring us all riches
 put sawbucks in your till and coins in our britches?'

"Eskimo Sam, at the thought of gold coins
 thrust out his hands thus to enjoin
 those extended by Alfred St. Claire
 and the men struck a deal to become millionaires.
 Jake would corral the Bandersnatch beast
 while Alfred would make a sturdy pine keep

"to fasten the beast to the timbers with chains.
 Alfred St. Claire would proceed to arrange
 for a show of the monster to muckers with cash
 gold dust, nuggets or furs from their cache.
 There would be only one showing, Alfred proclaimed
 for the Bandersnatch beast was quite far from tamed.

"For a week and two days Alfred remained
reinforcing the timbers and back window frames
for the Bandersnatch monster from Tazlina Lake.
Day after day as they waited for Jake
the muckers were told the Bandersnatch tales
of the terror and blood and gore it entailed.

"In legend and lore from the dawning of time
it walked on two legs when not covered with slime.
When it dropped to four legs it was as quick as a fox
it could rip gaping holes in a trapper's food box.
It was ruthless in anger and a terror awake
and ravaged all men who crossed Tazlina Lake.

"Day after day as night time grew longer
the tales of the Bandersnatch horror grew stronger
'til muckers and trappers and traders and wives
were chilled to the bone with Bandersnatch lies.
But still they were drawn to hear more of the tales
that shivered their spines and left faces pale.

"Finally it came, the monster's premier
and the Bandersnatch Monster would finally appear.
It was covered, of course, and strapped to a mule
that skittered and jumped like anyone's fool.
The beast was secluded in the Oogrook's Saloon
chained to the timbers like a golden spittoon.

"Jake, with his shotgun and twin forty-fours,
stood over the beast while it bellowed and roared.
From the Oogrook Saloon and well down Main Street
the muckers and traders who'd come to Cache Creek
drank up their courage in the Oogrook Saloon
for this terror of shows to open quite soon.

"By the day of the show, Cache Creek was packed
with those eager to view the vile Bandersnatch.
Alfred St. Claire with a cash box of tin
stood by the door charging a fin
to the muckers and trappers who trembled and quaked
at the thought of the monster of Tazlina Lake.

"Jake still remained with the Bandersnatch beast
and the roar of the monster stalled everyone's speech.
Just as the last of the muckers came in
and the last of their money was locked in the tin
Jake suddenly streaked from the across the saloon
his clothes all a'shred and his voice to the moon

"Yelling 'He's loose! He's loose! God, he's mean as snake,
this Bandersnatch Monster of Tazlina Lake.
RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!' he shouted once more
and the crowd in a panic rose from the floor,
flinging the windows and doors open wide
in a valiant attempt to salvage their hides.

"The doorway was packed and the windows were crammed
as panic-struck miners continued to scam .
They chose any crack that allowed a retreat
to escape the sharp claws of the Bandersnatch beast
'til the only one left was Eskimo Sam
who chuckled and juggled gold nuggets in hand.

"And in the excitement with fear in the air
Jake and his brother, Alfred St. Claire,
casually sauntered out the Oogrook Saloon
and mounted two horses whistling a tune
and that was the last of Alfred and Jake
and the Bandersnatch Monster of Tazlina Lake."

THE HINCHINBROOK BOWHEAD

"In the howl and the spray from the surge and the waves
 'tween isles of Hinchinbrook Neck,
 the main mast moaned and deck timbers groaned
 as the waves scattered men on the deck,"
 Quoth the **Lorelie** skipper as he dined upon kippers
 and struggled to hold down his rum
 Wrapped in a blanket speaking his frankest
 from the porch of his New Bedford home.

That grizzled old geezer with the eyes of a weasel
 sized up the crowd at his feet
 as he told them a tale of a phantom-like whale
 that haunted the Prince William sea.
 Forty years had slipped past since Hinchinbrook Pass
 had slipped `neath the **Lorelei's** keel
 but the mist in his eyes denied those lost tides
 and his hands hungered for a ship's wheel.

"Broadside to the waves like a backstepping knave
 that **Lorelie** struggled for draft
 in foam-crested waves, the ship was enslaved
 as she rocked to fore and to aft.
 Them men on the deck near broke their damn necks
 as the sea swabbed the deck with a roar.
 The wind rent the sails and the spray drove like nails
 as the ship reeled like a drunk stevedore.

"For a year we'd been lured from the docks of New Bedford
 to sail the Cape west after whale,
 ambergris for perfume and baleen to fill rooms
 for the women and whiskey and tales.
 Off old Mexico we'd been forced to row
 from the doldrums into the wind
 and in Hawaii's calm bays we'd courted brown maids
 then sailed into the Bering Sea's grin.

"But north of the Chain the icebergs remained
 well into the middle of June.
 Though the whales there were plenty it seemed scarcely any
 into which to drive a harpoon.
 Dozens dove deep in that crystal blue keep
 coming up miles away
 never hearing the sing of rope coils on the wind
 or feeling the line on belay.

"Then southward we turned from Bering Sea storms
 hugging the coast of the Chain
 past kelp-choked lagoons and volcanic ash dunes
 we danced to the williwaw's strain.
 Through Montague Strait the **Lorelie** scraped
 into the calm of the whale's breeding ground
 where baleen littered shores of the steep corridors
 in the fjords of Prince William Sound.

"But alone in that sea, awash with debris,
 not a beast in the Sound could be found;
 All walrus were gone and the seal had swum on
 to some other pelagic playground.
 That sea was so calm that the reflection therefrom
 could be used as a primping-up mirror
 to do lips up in red, as did our figurehead,
 and set her hair as would a coiffeur.

"Then came the blow from down Orca Cove
 sweeping south from the Valdez Arm
 and the waves licked the shoals and the thunder clouds rolled
 as the **Lorelie** struggled from harm.
 Thirty feet high them waves came nigh
 sweeping us toward the reef
 where sirens were singing and the furies were wringing
 their hands at the edge of their fief.

"Off Montague Isle the mast shuddered while
 six fathoms went to four and to three,
 through froth white as snow gouged up rocks from below
 as though fangs from out of the deep.
 Those volcanic piles about which the sea riled
 stood as a forest of trees
 and the **Lorelie** danced through this forest expanse
 'til her hull hung up tight in a crease.

"In terror we stood glued to the wood
 on the deck where the timbers did moan
 as suddenly onward a titanic wave lumbered,
 a green tongue licking high at the moon.
 The roar that it gave shook even the brave.
 It sent chills running up through my spine
 and that howl from Beyond became our Rubicon
 in a chorus of terror and brine.

"And then, like a ghost from some forgotten seacoast,
 from some legend or tale or dark tomb,
 came a silver-gray whale with a scarred fluke on its tail
 and a back bristling thick with harpoons.
 With one amber eye which was thrust above tide
 it seemed to be mocking our plight
 but with a push from its maw we inched from the jaw
 of that wave and that forest of night.

"Then the cascading wave pounded a grave
 for that whale then lay crushed in the shoals
 and the foam from the crest flooded its breast
 and thick blood mixed with the sea in rolls.
 From out of the deep with compassion replete
 it had breached to give us a shove
 then the ocean reclaimed that which remained:
 the flukes, the baleen and the blood.

"When the waves settled down and the froth from the crown
 of the ocean swept south to Cape Suckling,
 we thanked God above for that merciful shove
 which saved the ship's timbers from buckling.
 In a warming sea breeze we sank to our knees
 fighting back salt-laden tears
 as pangs of repentance spitted our conscience
 o'er the slaughter we'd engaged in for years.

"Off the rails of the ship the try pot we tipped,
 dropped blubber spades into the sea,
 then bales of harpoons and the slaughtering boom
 plummeted into the deep.
 Overboard went the davits, toggles and oil casks,
 the windlass, scrubbers and forks --
 and the flensing knives fell with the speed to reach Hell
 as the **Lorelie** bobbed like a cork.

"Ah, those 'Bible Leaf' days when I stood at the waist
of a long boat armed with harpoon
are as long gone as the wake the **Lorelie** made
in the still of Hawaiian lagoons.
Ah, the Bering Sea tide, 'Nantucket Sleighrides,'
and that stoveboat off the coast of Japan
where a narwhale with spire struck in his ire
and splintered our boat with his ram.

"Now, too often I dread my New Bedford bed,
'cause when the rest of these folks are asleep
I see that gray whale with a scarred fluke on its tail
rising up out of the deep.
With harpoons in his back he's a pushin' me back
out of the jaws of doom
and each night that I sleep he sounds from the deep
and blows from his watery tomb."

AN ALASKAN CHRISTMAS

"Let me tell you a tale that I swear is as true
as sourdough dumplings in caribou stew.
It's the wintertime saga of Johnny Muldoon,
a drunk from the floor of a Talkeetna Saloon
who became, unexpected, a figure of fame
whose deed is remembered though rarely his name.

"It was back in the winter of Nineteen Twenty-Two
when snowdrifts were as deep as upended canoes.
Far to the north at the mouth of Sheep Creek
was a homestead buried in snow shoulder-deep,
where a man with his wife and a young lad of ten
were locked for the winter in a rough-hewn cabin.

"But a blast of the wind struck with such force
that it unpegged a shotgun from over the door
and that deadly contraption, loaded for bear,
spit out its lead not caring where
and bad luck was it to he who stood in its path
and that young lad of ten absorbed the whole blast.

"There is no storm too vile, no wind is too strong
to chill the love in one's heart for what must be done.
Into that cold, the storm and the wind
drove a desperate father wrapped in bearskin.
Heading south to Talkeetna he guided his team
for the doctor to save his ten-year old dream.

"Now the curse of the winter at sixty below
is numbness in fingers and frostbitten toes
where the howl of the wolf and the blast of the wind
wears even the most seasoned of sourdoughs thin
for the freeze of the winter and mountains of snow
put the gentle north woods into a death throe.

"In Talkeetna the wagons had froze in their tracks
with no hope of movin' 'til springtime came back.
Snow mountains had buried the forest so deep
that dogsleds were founderin' and moved at a creep.
The pack on the streets was over the roofs
and Talkeetna was a forest of chimneys and soot.

"And the cold, oh the cold!!, it stabbed like a knife
through the cracks in the parkas and humor in wives.
The howl of the wind gnawed at the doors
blowing smoke down the chimney and snow up through the floors.
As small consolation, it was Christmas Eve
and the storm heading south was expected to ease.

"Now Johnny Muldoon, as was usually his case,
was hooched to the gills in Cavanaugh's Place.
A braggart and moocher who smelled of bear grease
he had the air of a gander from a gaggle of geese
lost in the forest as winter sets in
stumbling the scrub brush and honking for friends.

"Johnny Muldoon was racing his age
and his years in the bush had taken their wage.
Alone on a trapline from November 'til June
can strip the most brazen sourdough's tune
'til the hunger for humans burns like a fire
growing hotter each day as its flames mounted higher.

"He'd drink all his beer and then demand more
casting a sneer at each guest through the door.
The golden days of his life lay arrear
and his sour outlook laced the good cheer
like a vinegar dollop in a gallon of ale
which taints the first sip but not the wassail.

"When Johnny Muldoon had drunken his fill
He'd head for warm ground to sleep off the swill.
His pigeon-toed stumble traversed the saloon
'cross juniper floorboards avoiding spittoons.
A seat by the hearth with his head on his knees
he fell into a slumber scarce seeming to breathe.

"From the backroom off Cavanaugh's bed
came streamers of orange, white, golden and red.
Spiraled together from hearth to the door
they were tacked into corners and draped to the floor.
The floorboards were swept, the glasses were cleaned
and storm lanterns were filled with fresh kerosene.

"Then frolicking people began to arrive,
in families of triplets, by fours and by fives,
'til Cavanaugh's Place bubbled with cheer
(not to mention the gossip, courtin' an' beer)
as a sixteen foot spruce dug out of the snow
was covered with popcorn, candles and bows.

"The fiddles were tuned and the banjo was strummed
and vocal chords cleared and started to hum;
each person joined in with his own special key
singing 'Joy to the World' and 'O! Christmas Tree.'
And the warmth of that crowd challenged the fire
as neighbor kissed neighbor and farmer hugged prior.

"With the room cleared for dancin' the fiddles began
and young men and women paired off for the dance
while the old folks sat back suppressing their grins
and sideglancing those that might be next of kin.
The dancing was merry and the floorboards did shake
the planks of a boardwalk in a gentle earthquake.

"But then like the roar of a Hell-bound train
the front door flew open to Cavanaugh's Place
and the bite of the wind shivered the crowd
as the snowflakes swept in like winter-blown clouds.
In the frame of the door was a man's silhouette,
his clothes torn to shreds and his face frostbit red.

"His eyes, they were crazy, and his fingers they twitched,
(from shoulder to ankle his clothes had been pitched).
Snowballs were melting from off of his clothes.
His mustache was thawing and the white of his nose
made him appear as a winterland ghost
when the mercury hits sixty below.

"He lurched for the bar through the press of the mob
and, with a jigger of whiskey, he started to sob.
The tears trickled down his frostbitten cheeks
and the lump in his throat tortured his speech
but he planted his feet and pulled himself tall
with his face to the crowd and his back to the wall.

"My son's loaded with buckshot from shoulder to wrist
an' his temperature's risin' an' givin' him fits
and my wife, she's a starvin' just north of Sheep Creek
while I've battled this blizzard, its jowl to my cheek.
I've come south to Talkeetna for a doctor and aid
now I've got to get back for too long I've stayed.

"For three days I've stumbled about in that storm
wrapped in this bearskin a tryin' to keep warm.
With the damn bite of winter a chewin' my bones
I fear for the worst with my family alone.
So I'm beggin' you folks to load up my team
give me fresh dogs and back north I'll lean.'

"It was deathly silent throughout the room
and a pin on the floor would have hit with a boom
and that crowd gather 'round -- as did Johnny Muldoon --
not sure they were seein' just what they presumed.
Then Cavanaugh offered his best team of dogs
and the doc offered drugs and medicinal grog.

"Within an hour the sled was piled high
and the tears of a Christmas filled that man's eyes
for neighbor helps neighbor in this land of the North
and friendship is as precious as gold nuggets in quartz.
But when he started to mush out through the gate
Cavanaugh grabbed the father's arm yelling "Wait!

"That trail is too long for a man to withstand
and the fangs of the wind have shredded your hands.
We'll both take the trail north to Sheep Creek,
Now cover that frostbite and hear what I speak.
If your son's still alive, which I hope is right,
he can easily last, sir, just one more night.

"Tomorrow when the storm had blown its way south
we'll all leave together for Sheep Creek's frozen mouth.
Come. Sit by the fire. Cure that frostbite.
We'll leave before sunrise after spending the night.'
With a shrug of his shoulders the man expressed doubt
and as he went into Cavanaugh's, a shadow slipped out.

"Then terror of terror the next morning came
and the howl of the storm increased as it ran
down from the north with a savage new breeze
leaving snowdrifts to the top of twenty-foot trees.
And Cavanaugh's sled was lost in the storm
complete with the bacon and John Barleycorn.

"The father was stunned and stumbled in woe
but Cavanaugh still wouldn't let that man go
for once out the door, the force of the blow
would bury him deep in the grip of the snow
and that man with a heavy heart did lament
and with heavy sobs the silence was rent.

"Three days down the road when the storm had swept past
Cavanaugh and two men moved north through the pass
then down Sheep Creek to the home near its mouth
with dogsleds of foodstuffs, blankets and doubt.
The men had a cross should aid be too late
and the snap of the winter seal yet one more fate.

"The blast of the wind had so bent the trees
that they seemed to be praying like men on their knees.
The treetops were stripped and the branches were bare
and grotesquely reaching to grasp the cold air.
The pant of the dogs and skid of the sleds
punctuated the silence 'til they reached the homestead.

"With a pound of his fist on the frozen spruce door
Cavanaugh held his breath, and, when it opened he swore.
The wife stood by the hearth with her son in a chair
spoonfeeding him soup from a bowl earthenware.
On the table behind her were foodstuffs piled high
complete with the bacon and Cavanaugh's rye.

"It was Johnny Muldoon who had stolen the team
and gambled his life for the ten-year old dream
for on the floor of the cabin as stiff as a plank
lay Johnny Muldoon, his eyes starin' blank.
Life is a dance of a medly of tunes
and paying the piper was Johnny Muldoon.

"An' I tell yuy, *cheechakos*, I swear it's as true
as sourdough dumplings in caribou stew.
It was Johnny Muldoon that saved that young lad
and I've got the scar here to prove it, I would like to add,
for Muldoon brought me help as I was a lyin' near death
and gave up his life for an Alaskan Christmas."

TALKEETNA JACK AND CRYSTAL'S CHRISTMAS

[From DERELICTS, BUMMERS, SCOUNDRELS AND DOVES, Zumaya Press.]

"She was the belle of Talkeetna that winter," Dry Hole Willie said as he dug the hot ash out of his pipe and knocked the rosewood bowl against the side of his wicker chair. His three great grandchildren sat on the steps to the cabin and watched the old man dig a plug of tobacco out of a discolored leather pouch and jam it into the bowl.

"She was five or six that winter, the daughter of a missionary man who had lost his wife on the Chulitna the winter of the big snow. The missionary man just wasn't tough enough to make it through the first winter. He never even made November. His kid, a little blue-eyed girl, just showed up at Talkeetna Jack's one day about the middle of the month. My, but was she hungry! Ate two or three meals before she fell asleep on Jack's bed. She'd been out walking in the snow for a couple of days, following the course of the Chulitna downstream to Talkeetna, just like her daddy told her to do before he died. She came wanderin' up to Talkeetna Jack's just like she was walking to school and said, 'My pappy's dead. Can I live here?'

"Well, Jack fell in love with that little critter right off and took her into his house and heart. He made a little bed off to the side of the hearth, the warmest part of the cabin, and piled on some of his best furs for blankets. He didn't have much, not that any of us did then, but he gave her the best he had to offer. Then, while she was eatin' up, Jack dashed off to Dolly's to get some clothes for the youngster. Dolly and the girls wanted to bring up the tyke, Crystal was her name as I remember, wanted to bring Crystal to live in the house but Jack didn't think that was proper seein' how Crystal's father had been a missionary man.

"Crystal took to living with Talkeetna Jack real natural like. He'd never had a woman of his own of any age so havin' the belle around -- he called her 'the belle' -- made him change a few habits. He stopped chewing tobacco and cursing and took to washing his clothes regular, which caused the boys down at the White Wolf Saloon to hoot it up a bit. He even took Crystal to the only church in Talkeetna. My, my, my, and wasn't the Preacher surprised to see the two of them sitting in one of his pews singing with the best of the good folk of Talkeetna!

"Well, come Christmas time, Talkeetna Jack began thinking about Santa Claus and all the things that Christmas means to youngsters but there wasn't much that he could do. He didn't have any real money to spend and even if he had had money, there wasn't much that he could buy. Maybe he could have scrounged up a dress or a bonnet, but Jack wasn't much for buying things that weren't useful. Crystal had only come to live with him six weeks previously and it wasn't until the middle of December that it finally dawned on the mucker that he'd be having Christmas with a youngster.

"Now when it came to the Lord providing, Jack just wasn't one for faith. He figured that the Lord was so busy in other parts of the world HE just didn't have time for Alaska and besides, since the Lord was helping those that were helping themselves, there was no reason to bother HIM over something as insignificant as a gift for a little girl so it looked as if Crystal's Christmas was up to him.

"Well, Jack dug around in the back of the Wolf, the Wolf Saloon that is, and found an empty French liquor bottle. He cleaned up the container as best he could and negotiated with Lu Ann Harrison for some of the perfume she had bought in Seward for those days when her husband was up at Cache Creek inspecting his mine. He watered the perfume and then stole a strip of lace from the bottom of an old silk slip that was lying on a downstairs chair in Dolly's. He never asked whose slip it was and, as no one volunteered to mention ownership, Jack neglected to bring it up in conversation.

"Against his better judgment, he negotiated with Dolly to have a Santa Claus suit made from an old red bedspread that she had hidden in one of the bottom drawers of her dresser. Cavanaugh, the rotund, ill-tempered, poorly mannered, hard-core bartender and owner of the Wolf Saloon, had won the bedspread in a poker game some ten years earlier and had traded the material to Dolly for services rendered. Some of the material had been cut out to repair a curtain, but other than that, the red material was perfect for Jack's purposes. Jack also convinced Dolly to cut apart one of her older feather boas to make the fringe for his costume. As Jack had a long, snowy beard already, there was no reason to create one for the purposes of disguise. Jack hid the suit in his rafters, the one part of the cabin that the belle couldn't explore, and then went about finding the rest of the gear for his Christmas enterprise.

"It was not until mid-afternoon on Christmas Eve that Jack made his move. He had kept the belle up late the previous night and by three the next afternoon, she was exhausted. He sent her to bed and she had gone out like a light, undoubtedly with thoughts of sugar plums dancing through her head. Then he pulled his cache down from the rafters and dashed through the falling snow to complete this Christmas surprise.

"On the far side of the Chulitna River, Jack had hidden an old dogsled and harness he had borrowed from the Preacher. The Preacher wasn't using it Christmas Day so he was more than willing to let Jake thrill the belle with a visit from Santa Claus. Jack had also borrowed the pet caribou that the Sanderson's had raised and, with some extra rope, tied the caribou to the front of the dogsled. When assembled, the combination of Jack, sled and caribou looked about as much like Santa Claus, presents and reindeer as a chunk of coal looks like a ivory fork. But it was the thought that counted and in that the two were identical.

"Jack's first problem, he quickly discovered, was getting the caribou used to pulling the sled at all, much less in the direction that Jack wanted it to go. Unused to the harness and lacking the enthusiasm to learn, the caribou dashed off into the forest -- without Talkeetna Jack on board -- the moment it was harnessed and didn't stop until it had covered several hundred

yards. It only stopped when the dogsled tipped on its side and the skids dug into the snow and pulled the frightened animal to a stop. Jack righted the sled and, again, before he could get on the 'sleigh,' the caribou was off again. This time it took Jack about an hour to recapture the animal.

"It was early evening before Jack finally pulled himself into the sleigh and roughly negotiated the caribou out of the forest. The caribou, still frisky about having a sled tied to its neck, had given up trying to run into the forest. But, as soon the animal broke out of the woods and started across the frozen expanse of the Chultina River, the caribou smelled freedom and began trotting up the river at a pronounced clip. Jack's blood curdling screams did little to slow the animal and the pair disappeared from the proximity of Talkeetna and made a mad dash up the Chulitna River. Unwilling to lose the Preacher's rig, Jack stuck with the sled and caribou.

"It was not until almost half an hour later that the sled hit the exposed branch of a tree which had been frozen in the river the previous fall. One moment the sled was careening up the river and about to jump a bump and the next Jack, sled and caribou were all twisted together in a bundle of branches just below the snow line. The caribou struggled for ten minutes before it lay down in the snow, exhausted. Then Jack spent the next forty-five minutes slipping free of what was left of the tangled harness. Thereafter he wisely walked the animal back to his cabin.

"By the time he arrived back at his cabin, it was well after ten o'clock. He could hardly have called his endeavor a success. The Santa Claus suit had been ripped beyond all repair, the sled was badly battered, the harness had been pulled out of shape, and the caribou was pulling on the rope attached to his wrist with such strength that his skin had been rubbed raw. Worst of all, the bottle of perfume had frozen and cracked.

"Jack tied the caribou to a tree and upended the sled against his cabin. This was not going to be Christmas for the belle to remember. But it was going to be one for him to forget. Sadly he tossed the perfume bottle aside and began to concoct a regretful story for the Belle when she suddenly appeared at the door of the cabin, her face flush with excitement.

"Uncle Jack! Uncle Jack! SANTA CLAUS was here! He came with a whole bunch of reindeer and left me this fur coat! He didn't land on the roof though because he couldn't get down your chimney but he did leave this for you!"

"Talkeetna Jack opened a box wrapped with butcher paper and found a bottle of whiskey with a note from Dolly: 'I tried that trick with the caribou five years ago and didn't get back until midnight. Just in case you can't do any better, I'm dropping off a coat for the Belle with Cavanaugh. This bottle's for you. Merry Christmas! P.S. by the way, Cavanaugh makes a terrible Santa Claus!'"