

# ARCHERS by Dale Morrell

## Chapter 2

*Best friends...*

Ryan mused as he carefully watched Bobby's movements near the snare. He felt uneasy despite his deep-cover position.

*Bobby is my best friend, but I know how dangerous he can be to enemies in combat. And for some reason when Bobby looks at me, he is only seeing an enemy right now.*

Then a sudden rush of realization hit him, and he muttered silently, "I'll be lucky to get out of this alive."

It seemed obvious to him now—the horror of their experiences as Special Ops and Bobby's memories as a prisoner of war behind enemy lines in Vietnam had somehow invaded the present.

How ironic. This absurd life and death struggle could quickly end with a fatal strike using a bow and arrow, and yet it was a bow and arrow that helped forge their sincere friendship almost a decade ago.

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The boys had sealed their friendship the day after they first met, after Ryan's first day at school in his new hometown.

When the day began, he didn't look forward to dealing with all of the new people and new teachers. He missed his old school and friends.

He began to dread his first day when Chick was the first person he saw when he walked into the classroom.

He couldn't help but mutter under his breath, "Oh great!" That would have summed things up, but then someone suddenly grabbed him from behind. It was Bobby.

*I could have been blind and still recognized him, Ryan thought. I learned the first day I met him that he had a grip like a steel trap.*

"Good to see you made it!" Bobby said with a grin. "Come over here, sit by me," Bobby said. As Ryan moved toward the seat, he caught a glimpse of Chick glaring at him but he didn't respond. School was school. It didn't take him long to figure out that it wasn't much different from his school back home.

By the time lunch came around, Ryan had noticed that Jericho and Chick weren't around, and he was sure Bobby had arranged things that way for his sake. Most of the day they talked about archery and Ryan's bow and Bobby agreed to come over to shoot after school.

Ryan was already flinging arrows at a bull's eye target pinned to a bale of hay by the time Bobby arrived. He watched Ryan carefully as he released another arrow, and he could see as he was walking up that the arrow was true.

When it hit the target close to the center, Bobby said, "Wow, nice shooting soldier!" (He started using the word "soldier" as a child playing army, and just never stopped.)

"Thank you," Ryan answered. "You ready to give it a try?"

"You bet!" Bobby said, and Ryan immediately began firing instructions his way while retrieving his arrows.

"Okay, for your first try let's start out about ten steps away from the target. Now here is what I want you to do," he said, handing the bow to Bobby.

"Hold the bow like this, and this is how you grip the bow when you're ready to nock an arrow."

"Here is the arrow—now look at the fletching or feather vanes. Do you see how one of the three is a different color? That is the indexing vane that sticks up away from the bow itself and toward your drawing arm."

Then Ryan demonstrated each step and Bobby followed suit.

"Put the arrow on the arrow rest while you nock the arrow to the string. Now place your first three fingers on the string. The string should rest on the first crease of your fingertips.

"Place your first finger on top of the arrow nock and the other two fingers under it," Ryan explained.

"You will use your first three fingers actually to pull the string back."

"Okay, I think I see how to do it," Bobby said.

"Now hold the string and draw it back until your first finger touches the corner of your mouth, then release it smoothly," Ryan said. "Okay let's see what you can do."

Bobby drew back the string until his first finger touched the corner of his mouth and let go. To his amazement, the arrow flew true, flying straight for the target. But then it dropped and hit the ground, below the target.

Disappointed, he asked quickly, "What did I do? And what am I supposed to be looking at when I let go?"

"Well, you did a great job of shooting your arrow in a straight line. Now, you have to rely on your instinct, to make adjustments, for gravity and other things like wind resistance. That is why we call it instinct shooting. In other words, just do what you did but do it higher."

Bobby nodded and slowly nocked another arrow. Then he aimed at the target again but raised the bow higher. *If I pull it back harder, I think it'll go right through the center of the target,* he thought.

He released the string and instantly heard a smack. Then he felt a tremendous pain in his forearm. The string had hit his arm with incredible force, and he knew that rising welt was going to produce a heck of a bruise.

“Dang it, that hurt!” Bobby yelled, as he dropped the bow and danced around holding his arm. Ryan did his best to hold back his laughter—he did the same thing to himself and he knew how much it hurt. It was just funny the way Bobby was dancing around.

“You should move your left elbow outward so that doesn't happen again. It usually means you are locking your elbow to ‘pull harder.’ Always keep your elbow bent slightly.”

Even before Ryan could finish his comment, Bobby had retrieved the bow and was nocking another arrow to the string. Ryan had already noticed that Bobby could draw the bow back fairly easy when most kids their age struggled to get it drawn back at all.

Bobby's third shot hit much closer to the center and his fourth was even closer. By sunset, Bobby was getting the hang of it and it showed. He smiled from ear to ear after nearly every shot.

A searing pain stabbed through Ryan's left shoulder without warning, wrenching his mind from pleasant childhood memories to return to a harsh reality.

Only a few hours earlier his best friend's arrow had cut through his left shoulder, barely missing bones and sinew.

It was a miracle the shaft hadn't moved just a few inches further toward his heart and lungs—because it was clear that Bobby was aiming for his chest, even if his motive was unclear.

It happened without warning, and apparently without any premeditation.

*We'd crossed the Colorado state line and finally drove up to the entry point for the White River National Forest,* Ryan thought to himself sadly. *We couldn't wait to set up camp and start our elk hunt. Bobby and I have been looking forward to this trip since we first became friends.*

When they finally pulled up to the end of the paved road in that part of the national forest, there wasn't a lot of talking between the two. They were in awe, just soaking up the landscape's beauty, as they traveled another rugged six miles down a deserted logging road to reach their destination.

They clambered out of the truck despite their protesting muscles, stretched their legs and started unloading the gear.

“Breathe that cool mountain air, Bobby,” Ryan said after taking a long deep breath for himself.

“Ryan, this has to be the most beautiful place that I have ever seen,” Bobby said as they gathered their gear, slung their packs on their backs and headed up the trail. “Wait! I forgot something,” Bobby said as he abruptly turned back toward the truck.

Ryan couldn’t imagine what he could have possibly forgotten until he returned with a box in his hand.

“What? Don’t look at me like that,” Bobby said. “I’m not going to waste these cookies! Suzie made them for us. Besides, in a few days you’ll be glad I carried them.”

Just a mile down the trail they heard the first elk bugle of the hunt echo through the crisp high mountain air. It came from a long way off, but it was clearly a bull establishing his territory. They decided not to pull aside and investigate, figuring it was better to stick to their plan and just keep heading in the direction of Muskrat Lake. Four more miles away from all paved roads, main trails, and the press of other less-determined hunters.

They reached the lake that afternoon after a fast-paced hike and quickly set up their spike camp. As soon as the tents were up and the camping gear was in place, they headed to the woods and the hunt was on.

After Ryan and Bobby had put some distance between them and their camp, both of them took a few practice shots into a dirt bank before they headed out in search of the majestic wild elk.

Ryan decided to head north up the mountain face and Bobby would stay on the hiking trail to the west. They reunited after their first half-day hunt empty handed just before sundown, but both of them saw some elk and a lot of signs.

“I even had a chance at a small bull,” Bobby said, “but I passed on the shot. I’m hoping for a bigger, more mature bull.”

“You know you never pass on an animal that ‘you wished you had’ at the end of a hunt don’t you?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah, but I saw some big bulls at the timberline about three miles west of here,” Bobby said. “I think we should pull up camp and head that way tomorrow after we finish our early morning hunt.”

“Okay, if we don’t do any good in the morning then I’m up for another 3-or-4 mile hike as long as we have a better chance at a big bull,” Ryan said.

The night was clear and cold, but the morning air seemed colder than the night before. They could hardly sleep that night with all the anticipation of the morning’s hunt—exactly like it was when they were boys. They were up and at it an hour before daylight and ready to go.

They were determined to move even deeper into the mountain range and further from the easier terrain favored by weekend hunters (and the hunting pressure they put on the elk herds). They headed straight up a steep and rugged Rocky Mountain slope until they reached the timberline around 11,000 feet.

By the time they got there and split up, the bulls were singing their song. Back and forth they bugled, from bulls on the right side of the mountain to bulls on the left and vice versa. It didn't take long before both Bobby and Ryan found themselves right in the middle of the elk.

Ryan moved in close to a big herd bull and a half-dozen cows but never got a clear shot at the love crazy bull.

Several times he bugled at the bull and then raked a big stick against a tree trunk to simulate a competing bull raking his antlers on a tree.

The big herd bull screamed at him in testosterone-driven anger every time, and he could see the bull's antlers as he tore up a small spruce tree. It caught Ryan off guard when he realized his heart was pounding so hard that he felt as if it was going to explode out of his chest.

*Come on! I'm a battle-hardened special forces Vietnam veteran after all,* he thought to himself. *But it IS exciting....*

Once during the bull's unsuccessful search for his unseen opponent, the big boy almost stepped in the clear for a sure shot but turned back as Ryan drew his bow.

Bobby's ears constantly rang with the bugling of three bulls loudly competing with every breath, but they had already made it into the thick timber. He was able to slip up on a herd of more than twenty cows that occupied the interest of the three bulls. He approached from downwind and came within ten yards of the cows at one point, but he never saw the bulls.

When Bobby felt the wind shift and hit the back of his neck, he knew the gig was up. Sure enough, the elk caught his scent and spun away for a different country.

It is crucial to stay downwind during a hunt, especially when your quarry is elk. The problem with hunting in the Rocky Mountains is that the winds continuously change direction without warning—especially in the higher elevations.

Ryan and Bobby met up at their predetermined rendezvous point and headed down the mountain towards camp. They compared notes during their trek with great enthusiasm, and they agreed that Fred Bear was right about elk hunting: *it was the best.*

*Fred Bear,* Ryan mused. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since Ryan's dad had called to Bobby and him in the backyard that summer day years ago. They were shooting balloons with bows and practice arrows from their maximum distances.

"Hey boys, come here. I want you to meet someone," his father said, motioning toward the house. As the boys approached he extended his hand towards a tall, slender man and said, "This is a good friend of mine, Mr. Fred Bear."

Ryan could still remember the awe he felt and the rush of adrenaline that surged through his body at that moment. Bobby felt the same way, and the way their jaws dropped must have made an impression.

Fred Bear chuckled, shook his head and gave Ryan's dad a knowing glance before he said, "Hello boys! I've been back here watching you two shoot. I have to say I'm quite impressed. Most people don't attempt shooting at those distances. That would be hard even for me."

"Fred, this is my son Ryan, and this is his friend Bobby Dawson. We shoot all the time with one of your bows," Kendall said.

"Do you mind if I take a few shots with you guys?" Fred said. "I've been on the road selling archery equipment and could use some practice before I head out to Montana for elk this fall."

"Sure thing Mr. Bear. We would like it very much if you shot with us," Bobby replied, handing him his bow. "Is it true you shot a big grizzly with your bow?"

"Yes sir, I shot one. He was a mean old bear. I had hunted him for five days before he got close enough for me to get a shot, but if I could shoot like you two I would have gotten him the first day!" Fred said with a laugh.

Fred was kidding with the boys, but he also knew that Ryan and Bobby were exceptional shooters, and he'd told Kendall his opinion about them.

Fred stepped up to the mark and let one sail toward the target.

"Bulls-eye!" Bobby shouted as Fred nocked another arrow and let it fly in one smooth motion.

"Another bulls-eye!" Ryan said.

Then Bobby joined in the shooting and placed his arrow right beside Fred's.

"Nice shot young man," Fred commented.

*He's even better now,* Ryan thought to himself wryly, gingerly probing his roughly bandaged shoulder.

He remembers how they shot for hours that afternoon and even his father got in on the action. His father remarked later that it seemed as if the boys had a question for every arrow that took flight.

"What's the biggest buck you ever got?"

"Have you ever killed a lion or been to Africa?"

"What's the biggest animal you've hunted?"

"Do you like to hunt rabbits?"

The questions went on and on, but one question intrigued them the most.

"What is your absolute favorite game to hunt? If you had to choose one, what would it be?"

“No question boys. That would be wapiti, or as you know it, elk. There is nothing like being in the Rocky Mountains on a chilly morning and listening to a bull elk bugle.”

“Like a trumpet player?” Bobby interrupted.

“No, it’s more like a whistle,” Fred answered.

“Like a freight train whistle?” Kendall asked.

“No, it goes something like this,” and Fred made a whistle sound that came from his lips that had three notes to it. It was held out at the beginning then rose to a higher pitch before dropping off sharply.

*He was right as usual*, mused Ryan.

“Now boys, when that old bull makes that sound I get all excited. I’ll try to slip up on him and call him in close by mimicking the sound.”

“Why does he come to you?” Bobby asked.

“Well, he thinks I’m another bull after one of his girlfriends. So he tries to run me off. He better not get too close, because I’ll stick him if he does.”

The memory from childhood brought Ryan back to an exchange he’d had with Bobby as they walked back down the mountain toward their spike camp.

“Can you imagine being able to hunt all the time like Fred does?” Ryan asked.

“I would be in Heaven if my only job were to hike up these mountains after a big game like F-r-e-...,” Bobby said.

The last word trailed off into mid-air when he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye, and Ryan quickly looked to see what Bobby was picking up.

“Spruce grouse—there is more than one.”

They were both trained to spot movement and to always be aware of their surroundings. In Vietnam, their lives had depended on it. During Ryan and Bobby’s behind-the-lines missions, their skills became highly sharpened.

Ryan spotted the movement too. “Let’s go! Fred said those would make an outstanding camp meal if we ever got the opportunity to harvest one. I’ll take the one on the limb and you take the one on the ground. On three: one, two, three.”

“Now that was some shooting, buddy,” Bobby commented as he placed the freshly cleaned grouse into the pan. It didn’t take him long to prepare their in-country hot meal. When you hunt in the high country, you take every hot meal you can get. You never know when the weather will suddenly turn on you.

After lunch, Bobby and Ryan broke down their camp and reloaded their backpacks to resume their hunt for the bulls that Bobby spotted with his optics the day before. They were larger than any of the bulls they had seen before.

It turned out that the bull elk had ranged further out than Bobby thought. These were older and wiser bulls who had learned to escape hunting pressure during peak hunting seasons—they might even cross over a mountain ridge to reach mostly inaccessible areas rarely seen or hunted by human predators.

Nearly five miles later and more than a mile away from any known trail other than game trails, they finally found the best spot to camp. They took the time to inhale some of Suzie's cookies and set up the perfect camp, and then two very excited elk hunters were on their way to the timberline to track the bulls.

After climbing halfway up the slope toward the ridgeline where they'd planned to glass the slopes and valley, they decided to send out some of their imitation elk bugles. To their surprise, everything seemed to break loose as the three bull elk started bugling at each other with hormone-driven aggression.

Sheer excitement filled the air and Bobby and Ryan were so caught up in it, they felt like they were about to burst. This is why men scrape together money and plan 10-months out of every year for elk hunting season.

The Bulls seemed to be bugling from every direction, so for Ryan and Bobby it was a matter of choosing which Bull to hunt.

"I'm going after that one right there," Ryan said after hearing what sounded like the biggest bull on the mountain.

"Okay, I'll head up the slope towards those two," Bobby replied, pointing up the mountain towards a rocky slope that led to the timberline. With their plans laid, the two split up and headed out to harvest some elk.

Ryan was stalking up a long mountain meadow after his award-winning bull with the big lungs when the bull totally stopped his bugling. *Looks like I may have chosen the wrong bull to go after*, Ryan thought. *Bobby's bulls are still bugling with every breath*. Ryan spotted a fallen spruce tree nearby that would make a perfect observation post and claimed his seat. He pulled out his canteen and binoculars thinking, *I'll just sit here a minute and see if I can spot Bobby's bulls with my binoculars*.

Sure enough, there they were in a meadow, just below the timberline. The two bulls were now locked up in a stubborn fight over a seductive cow.

*Man, I wish I were over there*, Ryan thought. *Now where is Bobby? He should be there by now*.

*All we would have to do is climb the face of that short bluff and peek over. If he pulls it off without spooking them, Bobby would have a 30- or 40-yard shot*.

Ryan lowered his binoculars to scan the base of the bluff and said out loud to himself, "There he is! Now I get to watch the whole thing go down."

At that moment, Ryan was just as excited as if he were stalking the fighting bulls himself.



Meanwhile, Bobby was at the bottom of a 12-foot high bluff carefully plotting a path up the rugged rock face to the rim. He was getting more excited with every noisy crash of the big beasts' antlers—it sounded like an epic battle between two very mature and impressive bulls. His mind was shouting to him, *I've got to get up there now!*

Bobby quickly slipped his arm, shoulder and head between the bow riser and string so he could carry the bow on his back and free his hands for a freestyle ascent of the rocky bluff face. Even though he felt the time was running out, all he could manage was to climb an inch at a time.

*Man, moving this slowly up this bluff reminds me of those Vietnam missions in the jungle. I'd have to crawl mere inches at a time and wait for an hour between moves just to make a shot,* Bobby thought to himself.

*Whether you do it a jungle in Vietnam or on a rock face in the Rocky Mountains, stalking takes practice, patience, and skill. It's no wonder country boys who grow up hunting and stalking in difficult terrain make some of the best special ops stalkers and snipers.*

When Bobby got about halfway up the rock face, the two bulls broke up their fight and went quiet. *Oh no, I hope they aren't walking off,* Bobby thought, trying to move faster up the bluff.

*If those bulls walk very far off, they'll be out of range! And there's no cover for me to stalk them once they get to the meadow. If I can just....*

As Ryan watched through his glass, Bobby put his full weight on a rock jutting out of the bluff face and stretched himself out to get a better handhold. Then the rock slid out from under his boot!

"Bobby!" Ryan screamed as he watched his friend fall to the bottom of the bluff in a frightening contorted back layout position.

He fell into a shadowed area at the base of the bluff and was lying on his back. Ryan could see that blood was running out of Bobby's right ear and his massive body wasn't moving at all.

"Bobby, Bobby!" Ryan yelled. Dropping his binoculars, and leaving his bow and gear by the fallen Spruce, he began hurdling large logs, rocks, and brush in a desperate run to reach his friend.

As Ryan closed in at 200 yards, he could see that Bobby had made it to his feet holding his right ear. "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you!" Ryan said out loud as he ran closer.

Suddenly Bobby grabbed his bow and jumped behind a large bolder and Ryan froze out of long-practiced combat habit.

*What happened? Did Bobby see the bull?*

Ryan quickly scanned the terrain behind himself and was satisfied nothing was there. There wasn't an elk in sight anywhere, but still Bobby kept looking straight at him.

Ryan remained in a frozen position for a couple minutes, thinking, *an elk is going to step out at any moment.*

Finally, he felt satisfied and told himself, *there's no elk.*

With a deep sigh of relief, Ryan eased up and moved towards Bobby with a big smile. He still took his time just in case a bull suddenly popped out from a hidden position.

Ryan had closed the gap between them to 50 yards when Bobby suddenly stood up and came to a full draw! Ryan quickly glanced backward again, looking for Bobby's target. When he did, he heard the familiar snap of a bowstring being released.

Assuming Bobby had a good shot at a bull elk emerging from cover somewhere behind his position, Ryan looked back toward his friend only to see the arrow-headed directly at him!

He tried to dodge but was too late to avoid an arrow traveling at nearly 250 feet per second. The hurtling broadhead tip of the arrow sliced through his left shoulder and kept going.

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