

WIND OVER MARSHDALE

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Chapter One

A whispered breath skimmed across the long prairie grass like a giant, invisible hand stroking the fur of a silken feline. The screech of an eagle echoed through the valley as it dipped and glided above the river. The rounded slopes of the bank rose above the swiftly flowing water while small clumps of trees clustered nearby, but for the most part, the land stretched uninterrupted toward the horizon.

In the distance, a faint rumbling could be heard. It began to shake the earth as it drew nearer. A cloud of dust accompanied the approaching barrage. Hooves pounded. Nostrils dilated. Eyes reddened with fear. The musky stench of sweat mixed with the heat and dust.

The huge beasts moved en masse toward the precipice. Thousands of shaggy heads bobbed in unison as the herd of bison stampeded forward. As if in slow motion, they continued on, up and over the sharp bank of the river into the ravine below. One by one, they hurtled forward, oblivious to the fate that awaited them, as they toppled headlong to their deaths.

Thomas shot up in bed, panting. The T-shirt he wore clung to his body with sweat. It was not the first time the dream had come to wake him.

He took a deep breath, disentangled himself from the sheets, and rose to get a drink of water. No point going back to bed now. He wouldn't sleep anyway. He padded down the narrow hallway, passing the half closed doorways that sheltered his sleeping children. Ducking to avoid hitting his head as he entered the tiny kitchen, he paused for a moment to look at the expanse of landscape beyond the window. Mostly flat, with a rise of gently rolling hills in the distance, it was clothed with a carpet of rippling grass except for the odd patch of dry fallow. Just like in the dream.

The early morning sunrise was just beginning to filter in, reaching to shed some light in the shadowed corners of the room. Thomas had managed to rent a house near the outskirts of town. Correction. It wasn't exactly a house. The realtor called it a 'double wide'. Okay, it was a trailer, but it was the only property for rent in Marshdale at the moment. At least, that's what the realtor had said. It wasn't the nicest place – rather dingy if truth be told – and it was farther from school than Thomas would have liked, but it was still within walking distance. Better than the overcrowded and dilapidated homes he'd been used to as a child.

But that was another time. Another life.

He was here now, for better or for worse, and the people of Marshdale would just have to accept it. He was Thomas Lone Wolf, proud of his Cree ancestry, and determined to do something about it. As a community liaison, he'd worked with dozens of indigenous groups all

over the western provinces trying to set up business propositions. This time was different, though. It was personal.

With practiced fingers he undid his nighttime braid and shook out his hair, which fell well past his shoulders. Even at forty, there was no sign of graying or hair loss. It was straight, coarse and black, just like his ancestors' - the perfect picture of a Cree warrior.

Now that he was awake he allowed himself to replay the dream in his mind – at least the parts that he could remember. Like most dreams, the initial clarity soon faded after just a few waking moments. There were buffalo – always buffalo. And they seemed bent on suicide, careening to their deaths before he could stop them somehow.

He was going to start writing it down. The theme was too familiar; the mixture of fear and power too real. Some people said you dreamt in black and white. Thomas wasn't sure about that. He also knew there was blood in his dream – and lots of it. The redness of it stood out in stark contrast to the muted prairie landscape. And the stench. That unmistakable metallic scent filled his nostrils to such a degree that he could almost swear he still smelled it. Almost. But that was ridiculous and he pushed the memory of the coagulating stains out of his mind.

With a sigh he turned back to the cupboards and started readying the coffee. It would soon be time to wake the children and get ready for work himself. Another grueling day of lobbying something that should be rightfully his to begin with. Reality didn't stop for dreams.

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Rachel Bosworth pulled her car over to the side of the road; gravel crunching under her tires, and came to a rolling stop. She put the car in park, pulled the emergency brake into place with a jerk, and stepped out of the confined yellow compact. She inhaled a deep lungful of the late summer air, surveying the picture of pastoral serenity below.

Marshdale. This was to be her new home. Surrounded by a patchwork of gold and brown earth, it was an oasis of clustered houses and well established trees cocooned in a desert of wide open prairie landscape. Stretched out to the horizon, the summer sky met with rounded hills.

“Not very big,” Rachel's friend Sherri noted, joining her on the outside of the vehicle. “You sure you're going to manage way out here all by yourself?”

“I think it's perfect,” Rachel said with a satisfied smile. “Just the change I needed.”

“Just the escape, you mean,” Sherri teased.

“Maybe.” Rachel turned to her friend. “Come on, Sherri. I'm feeling scared enough as it is. This is a big move for me. Besides, you're the one who convinced me to move out west in the first place.”

“Yeah, I know. But I meant for you to move to Regina with Dan and me, not out to some backwoods hole in the wall. They probably don't even have cell service for Pete's sake!”

“It can't be as bad as that. The hiring committee said Marshdale was a totally modern town with all the basic amenities.”

“Yeah? Let's hope so.” Sherri shaded her eyes with her hand as she surveyed the town below them.

“Come on, Sherri. You’re my best friend. I need you to be excited for me. Tell me I made a good decision and that I won’t regret it,” Rachel begged.

“You’re right, kiddo,” Sherri agreed, putting on her most encouraging smile. “It will be nice to see you more often, even if it is a two hour drive.”

Rachel nodded. “What’s a two hour drive compared to thousands of miles all the way back to Toronto?”

“Who knows? Maybe you’ll meet some cute farmer and end up getting married or something,” Sherri shrugged.

“Not interested in men right now, remember? I am here to become the best Kindergarten teacher Marshdale has ever seen.”

“Sorry. That was insensitive of me. I know you’re still hurting over Rotten Ronny.”

“Who?” Rachel grinned, raising a brow.

“That’s the spirit!” Sherri laughed. “Who needs men, anyway?”

“Better not let Dan hear you talking like that,” Rachel warned with a chuckle of her own. “Come on. Let’s get going. I can hardly wait to get my stuff unpacked.”

“I can’t believe you brought so little stuff with you,” Sherri observed, climbing into the passenger seat.

“I wanted to start fresh,” Rachel shrugged, putting the small standard vehicle in gear and rolling forward. “Besides, moving a whole lot of furniture and stuff seemed pointless. I’ve rented this really nice little basement suite. It’s fully furnished. And that’s what you’re here for, remember? I need your expert advice on what stuff I need to buy in the city before school starts next week.”

“Now, shopping is one thing I’m very good at.”

“I know.” Rachel nodded with a grin. “It’s why I brought you along.

“Thanks. I thought it was for the company.”

“Of course. That too.” Rachel laughed again. She sobered quickly and glanced over at her friend. “Thanks, Sherri. For everything.”

“What are you talking about?” Sherri waved a dismissive hand. “I’d be some friend if I didn’t come to your rescue when called.”

“I mean about Ronald. I don’t know how I would have coped without you there.”

“I know, kid.” Sherri gave her friend’s hand a squeeze. “That’s what friends are for. Besides, I’ll expect pay back some day, you know.”

They were nearing the outskirts of the village. A large carved sign by the side of the road said, “Welcome to Marshdale.”

“I bet people live more freely here,” Rachel stated. “It’s what I’m hoping for. The simple life.”

“People have problems where ever they go,” Sherri noted. “It may look all peaceful right now, but I bet they have their share of troubles, just like everybody else.”

“Yeah, like what? No cell service?” Rachel asked, the corner of her mouth turning up.

“Now that would be tragic.”

“I know my life isn’t suddenly going to become a bed of roses,” Rachel admitted, “But it just seems to me that country living – the slower pace – has to do something to calm people. Make them less artificial and – you know – less selfish.”

“We can only hope,” Sherri shrugged. “Now come on, girlfriend. Let’s find that basement suite of yours. If we’re going to unpack, make a list and get back to the city before dark, we better get a move on.”

“Roger that.” Rachel glanced at the hand sketched map that was on the dash beside her. She made a left hand turn at the first intersection.

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The interior of the church was cool, quiet and dim. Just the way Pastor Todd Bryant liked it. He sat on one of the upholstered chairs in the sanctuary, allowing the viscosity of stillness to envelop him like a silky smooth liquid.

Sometimes he wished he could stay in here forever, without having to go out *there*. The recently refurbished sanctuary was a peaceful place compared to the world just outside its double oak doors. When he had come here just a year ago, he knew the Marshdale Community Church would be a place of refuge; a place to rest and strengthen his own weary spirit. A place to hide.

Modern and well kept, the Community Church had the appearance of comfortable affluence – a testament to God’s favor. The folks who attended were proud of their commitment to the Lord’s work in Marshdale and God had blessed them with material prosperity. They required little actual input from the pastor. *Just keep the ship running smoothly, as instructed by the board, and everything should be just fine.*

Perfect. His less than amiable departure from his last church had left him feeling just a bit shell shocked. He needed a place to hide out for a while. As long as he followed the program. . .

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Another soul sat alone waiting. The room was dark, the slatted shades drawn over the open window. The only light came from three candles burning in their resting place on the pentagram table top. The air was rich with the heady scent of incense smoldering in the small, intricately designed brass burner. The woman breathed deeply. *Empty the mind. Allow the inner self to emerge . . .*

A sudden breeze whipped into the room, announcing its entrance with a slap of the wooden slats on the window frame. It caressed the chimes hanging nearby before darting to tease the three flames into a flickering dance.

She smiled. Yes. There was so much to share; to enrich the lives in this town. There were many paths to enlightenment, but ultimately they all ended one way. It was up to her to release this narrow minded and stiff necked people to accept that.