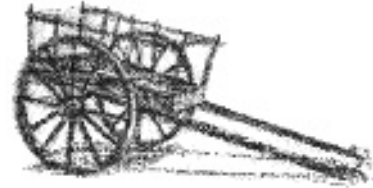


CHAPTER No 1



Always, the dream was the same. A dream of buffalo. One buffalo.

She would be walking. Walking towards a fallen bull buffalo as the hunt moved on ahead of her. She was alone, far ahead of the other women and children, eager to find her father's marker so she could run and tell her mother which buffalo was theirs to butcher. Too eager. She had come too soon.

As she neared the great animal it rose and came towards her. Not charging, but walking with

great dignity.

And she could not run. She could only stand as if she were part of the prairie, rooted to the spot, like a tree or a stone—one of the great boulders that nestled into the earth. She stood and waited as the buffalo walked towards her.

And then, when it came so close she felt she would soon be near enough to touch the curling hair of its face or smell its grassy breath—then it stopped.

And still she could not run. Still she stood as if her moccasined feet had grown into the earth. As if held by the huge brown eyes that gazed into hers.

She was never afraid then. Just tired. Terribly tired, as if she'd been the one running from the hunters. So tired that when the great beast at last sighed and fell dead before her, she too fell. That was what awakened her. She moved to stop falling and jerked herself awake. She was trembling, her legs tangled in her blanket as though she'd been running in her sleep.

Now she lay curled in her blanket on the ground beside her little brother, Joseph. At least she hadn't wakened him. She knew that six-year-olds sometimes had trouble getting back to sleep, or even lying still enough to let others dream. Ten-year-olds knew better.

Angelique inched away from the warm space where their blankets touched. She could see well enough now to make out the sleeping form of her mother across from her. Papa was gone, though.

As she slipped noiselessly out of the tipi into the early-morning mist she could see the men mounting their horses and riding off. The scouting party, five men, was leaving. Her father, Louie, would be with them. She watched the silhouette of horses and riders against the pale dawn sky.

Yesterday the scouts had not returned until late in the day. They had seen no buffalo. Not one.

It had been three days since Angelique and her family had left Batoche. Along the way, other families had joined them, until nearly a hundred

carts were strung out across the prairie. Three days of bumping along in creaking Red River carts, hoping for a herd. They hadn't expected anything on their first day out, but over the next day and the next, people had become quieter, more expectant.

The spring hunt was important. More important this year, since last fall's hunt had gone badly. Winter had come early and the great herds had moved south too soon. Not as many buffalo had been killed, and there had been only enough pemmican for their own use. Selling the pemmican the women made was vital if they were to buy the things they needed from the fort—tea, sugar and molasses, pots and kettles. Sometimes there would even be enough credit left for something special. Angelique remembered the shiny blue cloth she'd seen last time they were there. She could imagine her mother sewing it into a blouse for her, a beautiful satin blouse for church and parties. She could almost feel its smoothness on her cheek. This *had* to be a good hunt.

But the dream haunted her. She hoped it was a sign that there would be buffalo today. It *had* to mean that. Or perhaps it was just that her excitement about this special hunt had crept into her mind as she slept. This year she had a big part to play. For the first time she would run after the hunt. She hoped it was just that. She would not let herself think that it was worry about her father, or her beloved Michif.

She moved quietly. Moccasined feet are silent. How else had her father moved away from his family so early without waking them?

Angelique loved this time of day. The prairie lay peaceful and silent and the air smelled fresh and new. They were camped in a small hollow not far from a hill. She would climb that hill and watch the day dawn.

They were not supposed to leave camp, but surely her mother wouldn't mind. After all, she wasn't really leaving, she would stay in sight. Close enough to run back. *I'll be back before anyone wakes up anyway*, she told herself.

Other years, François would have been with her. They would have climbed the hill together. François LaVallée was ten too. She'd known him for years. They'd been playmates on earlier hunts. But last year François had started doing boy things. And she'd been stuck behind, helping hang the strips of meat to dry for pemmican, keeping the fires going, learning to cook and do beadwork. It wasn't fair. The boys got to have traplines in winter, and they rode about practising firing their imaginary guns while galloping their horses. They had to learn to load the guns. Some of them would ride with powder horns and shot bags across their shoulders, even before they were old enough for guns. She wasn't sure if she was angry or sad about the way François had changed, but she missed him. The LaVallées had joined the hunt two days ago, and François hadn't even said hello.

He didn't know that this year Angelique would be doing a boy's job. She'd been on hunts before, but then she'd stayed behind with the

carts and the other children and had come along only as the women came to cut and hang the meat.

This year she would be running ahead of the women and children to search among the fallen buffalo for her father's marker. Usually he would throw one of his gauntlets, a beaded glove, beside the animal he had killed. All of the men did that. It was the beadwork that identified it. Angelique would be looking for her mother's distinctive wild rose pattern, the same that was on her own moccasins.

She was almost to the top now. Her moccasins felt damp from the dewy grass, and already the sky was lightening. Streaks of pale gold and pink coloured the eastern horizon. Away from the camp and the resting horses and people, the air was filled only with the smell of the grasses she had trampled as she'd walked: wild thyme and sage mixed with the scent of faraway streams and trees and the little lakes that came only in spring. She breathed it blissfully.

Later, the day would be filled with dust and screeching from the carts as the Metis hunters and their families moved along. Now the silence was broken only by birds. Angelique smiled. She always thought they sounded sleepy this early in the morning, their first chirps and warbles muted as if they were clearing their throats. A killdeer appeared from nowhere, almost at her feet. It cried its name softly as it moved with its smooth run to disappear into the tall grasses as quickly as it had appeared.

Horses and riders—she heard them before she saw them. They were coming her way, but it was a long moment before they appeared over the crest of the hill opposite the one on which she stood. Why were the scouts returning so soon?

Angelique turned and ran back to camp.