

Buffalo Dreamers

A novel by

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Prologue

It was a good time to be a wolf. Winter had been unusually harsh, with an early autumn and heavy snow, leading to exhaustion throughout the famished buffalo herd. The pack roamed from Old Faithful to Mammoth Hot Springs, at first culling the tough old bulls that struggled to keep up. Then, as the birthing season came to its frothy peak, the wolves feasted on the warm organs and still-soft bones and sinews of fresh-dropped calves, their bodies matted with the sweet fragrance of birth fluids streaked with blood, even licking clean the nesting pod of grasses where the cow dropped the calf it had carried all through the snows.

The buffalo swept through the forest, chewing the fresh tips off every tree limb within reach. As the snow was blown clear from the ridges by the steady Northern Rockies winds, they mowed the underlying grasses to the precise height that evolution had designed their lip to ensure re-growth. And when the first thaw of early spring opened the trails down from the wintering slopes, the herd pulsed with the innate knowledge that food supplies were over-grazed and hard times were ahead. They began to move, instinctually following ancient migration routes that knew no boundaries, down a network of streams and canyons to the confluence with the Yellowstone River, and from there, onward to the lush but forbidden pastures of Paradise Valley in the heart of Montana cattle country.

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The late afternoon sound was unmistakable, a steady whup-whup that was a combination of powerful motors and huge blades cutting the high-altitude air. Sam Comstock, an Iraqi war vet on contract with Montana Fish & Game to put his Marine sniper skills to good use, turned the beat up government issue truck towards the chopper, half expecting to hear the following shriek of war planes returning from a mission. But there was no smell of burning oil, no likelihood of an improvised roadside bomb here on the north side of the vast, nearly deserted Yellowstone National park, only the disinterested shuffle and snort of a few elk on the ridge above and a small herd of antelope below, pawing to get at the meager grass beneath the crusty remnants of late-April snow. He took a deep breath to steady himself, ran his fingers through his thick auburn hair, and searched the horizon.

“What the hell’s going on?”

Big John McLaughlin, a senior game warden and Sam’s boss, leaned forward from the back seat and fidgeted with the scanner, trying to find the right channel to put him in touch with headquarters. He gave Sam’s broad shoulders a squeeze. “Just what we came for, what pays the bills.”

“That doesn’t sound like any civilian chopper.”

“Well now, I’m just not sure who besides us they got up in the air or on the ground. Lemme see here.” BJ randomly hit a channel with a screechy voice backed by the roar of helicopter engines: “There’s one, get him! Bring the ship in closer! And the little one, there! Smoke him!”

Sam’s bloodthirsty associate, Oxnard, let out a war whoop. “Lock and load boys! We are fuckin-A in business!”

The forest opened up to a long, broad meadow with a herd of 60-70 buffalo stampeding down to the Gardiner Gate at the north entrance of the Park. And banking in hard over the ridge was an Apache attack helicopter, coming in low and fast.

“By god, you’re going to catch us in friendly fire!” BJ barked over the radio. “Give us some goddam room! And who the hell are you?”

“This is Lieutenant Jack Walker, US Army Montana Reserves, 163rd Battle Streamers. Mission classified, but be advised, you are in harm’s way.”

Sam pulled in close beside the herd, steering with his left hand and holding his M40 sniper rifle in the crook of his elbow, aiming out the window while careening across the uneven range at thirty miles per hour. Oxnard was seated in the passenger window, getting set to blast away over the roof of the truck, while BJ angled for a shot with his 352 Magnum revolver. A buffalo calf had fallen behind and was in a direct line between the chopper and jeep. Sam saw the door gunner load his massive 30mm Chain Gun, and heard over the radio: “You want me to shoot a calf?”

“Get ‘em now!” Walker commanded. “The nits grow up to be lice, don’t they?”

The gunner took aim and unleashed a barrage of 1200 rounds per minute, obliterating his target with Sam’s jeep a scant ten yards beyond the zone of mayhem.

“What the hell is an Army chopper doing here?” Sam asked.

“They told me it’d be an inter-agency operation,” BJ replied, “but I figured we were brought in to cull the old and infirm, not massacre the whole goddam herd!”

“Closer!” Oxnard shouted. “I’m goin’ for a head shot.”

The closest bull hooked its horn, shearing the driver’s side rear-view mirror clean off.

“We get any closer you’re going to be able to brush his teeth!” BJ growled. “Sam! Watch it, ahead!”

Sam swerved to miss two people on an ATV, coming straight at them, waving a blanket. The ATV passed between the truck and the buffalo, then skidded around and came right back to place themselves as a shield directly in Oxnard’s line of fire.

“Get outta the way!” Oxnard shouted, practically climbing out the window to get a better line. In response, the passenger on the ATV stood on the back seat and pulled open his shirt to offer his bare chest as a shield.

“By god, I do believe these are Indians!” BJ said, pulling up on his pistol.

Sam sped up as fast as he dared, but the ATV kept pace alongside, the herd pushing right on through a prairie dog town, several of the buffalo going down hard as their hooves were caught in holes. Up ahead, Sam saw several more figures angling in to provide a human shield: two on horseback, one on a dirtbike, here came another on an ATV. Now, from further down the hill coming up from the Park boundary town of Gardiner, were a couple of pickups bristling with cowboy-hatted hunters firing into the herd.

“Getting kind of crazy out here,” Sam said, as the military chopper came back around, the door gunner blazing away at everything that moved, which had the immediate effect of hazing

the buffalo away from their preferred direction down the Old Yellowstone Trail towards Yankee Jim Canyon.

“Herd’s turning!” Oxnard shouted. “Sonsabitches are headed right into town.”

“And they’re splitting up. Sam, leave the main body for the chopper, follow that gang over yonder.”

Sam cranked the wheel over, powering through a four-wheel slide to fall in behind a group of eight buffalo that tore through a barbed wire fence as though it was gossamer, then down past the high school where the kids were swarming out at the end of class. The group split again and Sam followed four buffalo onto a back street.

“Stay right,” Oxnard said. “We got two easy ones over there.”

Sam slammed to a stop and Oxnard and BJ climbed out, reloading as they moved. A mother and calf were stopped beside a reflective storefront window, the mother panting hard but moving her head back and forth as she stared into the window. Sam noticed that she had a distinctive white star on her forehead, which was in sharp contrast to the craggy black mane of hair on the top of her head and around her massive neck

“Sweet old thing is admiring herself,” BJ said. “I’ve heard they do that.”

“Last things she’ll ever see,” Oxnard said, raising his rifle.

Several kids came around the corner and screamed for Oxnard not to shoot. He hesitated.

“What d’you want me to do, boss?”

“Just hold on a sec,” BJ said. “I’m thinking.”

Sam felt a shudder go through his body. The presence of civilians, especially young people in the middle of a firefight, was deeply unsettling. They looked to be about 14-16 years

old; in Iraq, you would have assumed most were armed and potentially lethal, and fired at the slightest provocation.

“Take care, man. These are just kids.”

“We got a mission to do!”

“Stand down, Ox.” BJ ordered. “Sam’s right, this is getting just a bit too... western.”

A pickup truck came around the corner with four guys in cowboy hats, each holding a rifle.

“Looks like we’ll have to rely on some Montana boys to get the job done,” Ox huffed.

Three girls placed themselves between the truck and the two buffalo. “Chill out! We’re not going to let you shoot them.”

“Just back away, darlins, this won’t take but a minute,” one of the cowboys said.

“Easy does it,” BJ said. “We don’t want to make matters worse, now do we?”

The girls got between the mother and the calf, and the calf bolted twenty feet down the street. A guy in the truck immediately opened fire, tearing three quick holes in the side of the calf and dropping it in the gutter. At this, all the students became hysterical, circling around the pickup and pounding on the sides. One of the cowboys got out, setting his rifle on the seat and motioning for the kids to step back.

“I’ll do this the easy way,” he said, buckling on a belt and holster that held a pearl handled .45 revolver.

“You just doing that for your personal protection?” a girl asked.

The cowboy winked at her and walked right up to the cow buffalo, facing it head-on within an arm’s length, then did a quick-draw, but his gun was empty.

“You dick head!” one of his buddies said.

“I thought you were gonna help it,” the girl said.

“I surely am,” the cowboy said, turning his back on the buffalo and removing a single cartridge from his belt.

Sam saw the old cow stiffen a bit, its curly tail straightening out into an upright flagpole. The animal must have weighed close to a thousand pounds, at least half of which seemed to be concentrated in that massive front assembly of head, neck, and shoulders – a perfect battering ram equipped with delicate curving, very pointy horns.

The cowboy placed the bullet in the clip, spun the holder, and kissed the shiny end of the barrel. “We’ll do this Russian roulette style,” he said. But before he could turn and pull the trigger, the cow bolted forward with a surge of speed and power that was truly astounding, especially for the cowboy, whose mouth grimaced open as the horn curved through his jeans and up into his rear end, the cow flicked him ten feet into the air then stomped twice on his crumpled body before dashing off at an almost immediate thirty-five miles per hour.

“Goddam it, she’s gettin’ away!” one of the guys shouted, rushing to help his fallen cowboy comrade. And in the commotion, the cow disappeared down the street and back up towards the school.

Beads of sweat were on Sam’s forehead. He gripped the steering wheel so tight his knuckles were white, his breath coming in short gasps.

“Let’s get outta here.” BJ said. “Ox, you coming?”

“Yeah, but I should go with those cowpokes, least they’re not afraid to do what’s got to be done.”

Sam felt like he could barely breathe. He rounded the corner and saw the white-starred mother buffalo on a hillside above the football field, its plaintive, deep-chested bawling echoing in his own wounded heart.

BJ gave him a sideways look.

“You alright with this son?”

Oxnard punched Sam hard in the shoulder and fired off two more quick rounds into the great beyond. “Let’s hit it!”

The repeated gunfire now had a galvanizing effect on Sam, a combination of anger and excitement that provoked him to push the accelerator to the floor, setting all four tires in a dust-cloud creating spin. He clenched his jaw and laid a death grip on the steering wheel as they plowed towards the ridge, Sam reflecting that there was nothing wrong with himself that couldn’t be washed away by buffalo blood.

“Yes sir,” Sam managed to say through clenched teeth, “all sorted out.”

But Sam knew that things were far from sorted out. Long armed and muscular with angular, unshaven features, he appeared much older than twenty-five. He had inherited his mother’s deep blue eyes and a lighter shade of her flaming red hair, the rare combination of which she deemed a providential sign. But it had been awhile since he felt anything resembling providence.

He enlisted in the Marines right out of high school. It was a long ways from the Nevada backcountry town of Ely to far off Iraq, a country he wouldn’t have been able to find on a map before they put a sniper rifle in his hand. The evident tension in his shoulders, neck, and face were indications of a barely controllable, deeper trauma that he acquired in the deadly Tigris

River valley. Something was broken; he didn't know what exactly, nor apparently, did the Navy doctors who removed a t-bone's weight of shrapnel from his shoulders and chest, leaving a few spiny fragments that were too close to his heart to be safely cut out. They proclaimed their operation a success and sent him down the hallway where a team of post-traumatic stress experts listened to him talk or admired the pictures they asked him to draw. It felt good to be paid attention, even though it seemed no different than jump-starting the battery of a side-swiped, rear-ended car you then drove off a cliff with the license plates removed: a wreck.

Soon after coming home he was told by his high school girlfriend, who had loyally waited for him throughout his long tour, that he was distant and strange. She dumped him within the month for a recent grad of the University of Nevada at Reno who had the good sense, in her opinion, to build a future for himself rather than go off and fight other people's wars. It made Sam raging mad and pushed him to an edge that he hadn't known was there, especially since his younger brother Blake had introduced her to the guy. He got in some serious street fights that should have landed him in jail, but he ended up a few drunken days later standing on the rooftop parapet of an abandoned four-story warehouse, considering a swan dive into oblivion. A strong gust of wind caused him to lose his balance and fall backwards rather than forwards. He hit his head hard and lay there, retching and nearly unconscious, unsure whether it was providence or bad luck that had saved him from himself. A snow flurry early that next morning shocked him awake and he stumbled down the stairs to the street, resolved to do a better job at self-destruction.

It didn't help that he also came home to a father falling fast into the darkness of Alzheimer's. The strain of caring for his dad caused his mother to leave Ely to be closer to Blake off at UNR. Sam had the house to himself and he would wander the rooms, feeling

increasingly distant and strange. When that got to be too much, he'd go and sit beside his father at the rest home, neither of them talking. The doctor once thanked Sam for being such a loyal son, but when Sam asked if Alzheimer's was contagious, because that's why he mainly came to sit, hopefully to forget the things that had happened over there, the doctor strongly encouraged him to go get some counseling.

What seemed to work best was to go out alone to hunt the wide-ranging deer and antelope that roamed the surrounding valleys and mountains. He used his hazard duty pay to buy a fancy single shot stalker rifle, tricked out with an even fancier scope. The 43-inch barrel and custom charged and tipped bullets allowed him to stalk on foot over open ground with miles of uninterrupted visibility, both for himself and for his prey. Even with the expensive firepower, the odds were all on the other side, which was how he liked it: a nice change from Iraq, where men armed with World War One Russian rifles went up against laser guided missiles and satellite-directed drones.

Meeting BJ two months after being discharged was the first good thing to have happened. They met while Sam was scoping-in his rifle out at the shooting range. The meticulous care he gave to setting the scope for a thousand-yard shot – much longer by far than for any of the other Saturday shooters – attracted BJ's attention.

"I'm thinking you're not from these parts, and that you know just what the hell you're doing" BJ said.

Sam wrapped the shoulder strap around his right elbow, lay down on the ground, and created a tripod shooting platform with his left forearm braced in taut linkage to his right arm and shoulder. He took aim, fired, then carefully ejected the spent shell and put it in his shirt pocket.

“Load your own, eh?”

“Yeah, and I’m also from around here. Or at least was.” Sam sat up and used a spotting scope to check the accuracy of his shot.

“None of my business, but I sure hope you’re not fixing to shoot anyone important.”

“No, the Marines paid me to bag my limit on that score. Now I only shoot to eat.”

“Marines, huh? Well son that makes two of us.”

BJ was a fellow vet, although from the much earlier Southeast Asian mud-hole of a conflict. A Nevada game warden, he recognized Sam’s backcountry upbringing and USMC Scout sniper team skills as valuable assets for a special assignment he was about to begin with the State of Montana. He offered Sam a temporary job to come along on the month-long wildlife management project and Sam immediately signed on. In the weeks leading up to the trip, BJ quickly became something more than a boss: a kindred spirit who could speak with Sam in the secret language of a returning warrior. But there was a lot that Sam was not ready to tell anyone, especially about the 7mm bullet and two dog tags that he brought home from Iraq. The bullet hung between the tags on a chain necklace hidden beneath his t-shirt. The tags – his own, and one of a fallen buddy – were a reminder of what he owed those left behind; the bullet was a deadly link to the past and an ever-present portent for the future.

For now, he was just glad to be in Montana with BJ and his lunatic, varmint control specialist, Oxnard, and to try and forget as much of his recent past as possible. He put his hand over his heart, with the bullet and tags pressed against his chest, knowing that the choice was always there. It wasn’t exactly sorting things out, but it was a way of getting through the nightmares that kept him awake at night.