

WENDIGO DREAMS

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She came in his nocturnal dreams, calling to him, luring, whispering deadly promises in his ears, filling him with unclean thoughts and desires, cravings for flesh and blood, sweetbreads, carnal desires best not to think about. The images that crept nightly into his mind were a curse, sick and depraved nightmares, making him feel less than human, unclean, pushing him to the brink of eternal damnation.

Only cheap firewater kept the images at bay, pushed back the dreams and kept his body from trembling in fear. White man's whiskey, and lots of it, was his only earthly salvation, the one thing keeping him from going stark raving mad.

Swift Runner opened his eyes and looked around. A boreal forest surrounded him, a vast wilderness, frozen in the midst of a brutal winter, silent and cruel as the grave, not a single bird or animal to be seen. He had been standing there for several minutes, eyes closed, carefully listening to his surroundings, hoping to hear sounds alerting him to the presence of game. But all was silent; the blanket of snow laying heavy on the ground, and in the branches of the pine trees, muffling all noises and making it seem like he had stuffed cotton deep into his ears.

Winter in the Canadian territories could be terrible, even deadly. Endless days of freezing cold, blizzard conditions, hunger, and possible starvation. Those who dared venture into remote areas faced isolation, loneliness, and hardships unimaginable. The icy cold cut like a knife; frigid winds howling like hungry wolves as they rushed down from the mountains, seeking passage beneath protective garments of leather and fur, burning the skin and turning toes black as rotted teeth.

A full-blooded Cree Indian, known to his people as Ka-Ki-Si-Kutchin, he had learned at an early age how to survive in the wilderness, even during the terrible winter months, mastering the art of hunting and trapping, providing meat for his people, and trading furs for needed supplies at Fort Saskatchewan, bartering with the white men for tools, blankets, dried goods, and other necessities. Trading for whiskey.

He leaned his Sharps rifle against the trunk of a pine tree and removed his heavy leather gloves, blowing into his cupped hands in a feeble attempt to warm them. His feet were also cold inside his moose-hide moccasins, but there was nothing he could do for them at the moment. Not without a campfire to warm his flesh, and there was no time for such luxuries. Luckily, the rest of his body was protected by a bright-red hooded capote, made from a warm Hudson Bay blanket, and a pair of leather leggings.

He had been following the tracks of a small herd of elk for days, and could not afford to lose their trail before making a kill. Failing to gather meat could mean his wife and six children, even his in-laws, would starve. He had left his family at the hunting camp, crowded inside the simple wooden cabin he built with his own two hands. Crowded, but not cold; but soon the dried rations would run out and their bellies would be empty. The little ones, too young to understand the reason behind their gnawing hunger, would set to crying, their pitiful wails drawing wolves and other dangerous predators into the camp. Drawing her.

“Stop it. They are just dreams.”

Swift Runner’s words fell erroneous at his feet. He knew they were more than just dreams, far worse than nightmares. The hideous images and whispered voice entering his mind every night was a curse from a cannibal spirit, known to the Cree people as the Wendigo.

Reaching into the front-pocket of his capote, he pulled out a half-full bottle of whiskey. Removing the cork, he put the bottle to his lips and took a long drink. The liquid burned his throat and warmed his belly, pushing back the chill and allowing feelings to return to his fingers and toes. He took a second drink, then recorked the bottle.

He wanted to drink more, desired to find a sheltered spot and finish the whole damn bottle, but dared not. People depended on him. If he consumed too much, his mind would get cloudy; he might even get sleepy. Taking a nap in such harsh conditions could mean never waking up.

Swift Runner was once one of the best hunters and trackers on the frontier. He had provided meat for the Hudson Bay Company, and the people of Fort Saskatchewan, and served as a guide for the North-West Mounted Police. But that was before being introduced to the white man’s alcohol.

He had developed a strong taste for firewater, a craving that often overtook him and pushed all other thoughts aside. Even his family took second place in his life when there was a bottle in his hand.

Well-liked by his tribe and the people at the fort when sober; the tall, muscular Indian was terrifying when drinking. He was a nasty drunk, who loved to fight, beating down many a man with his fists and feet. Things had gotten so bad they kicked him out of the fort, and he had been forced to move his family back to the Cree village. But even his own people didn't want to put up with his drinking, and the violence that came with it, and he had to relocate to his hunting camp twenty miles north of the fort.

Swift Runner wiped his bare hand across his face, removing the ice crystals clinging to his eyelashes and nostrils. He wiped a few drops of whiskey from the corners of his mouth, licking the drops from the tips of his fingers.

Blinking several times, he studied his surroundings. It was a little before noon, but the forest was draped in layers of shadows making tracking difficult. Not that it would be much brighter out in the open, because the winter sun remained hidden behind thick, gray clouds heavy with snow.

Blizzard is coming.

If it snowed, he would have to call off the hunt rather than risk wandering aimlessly in the forest. The light powdering of snow that fell the previous evening already partially filled in the elk tracks, adding to the difficulty of his hunt.

Grabbing his rifle, he half-cocked the hammer and worked the lever to make sure the metal had not frozen in place. His Sharps model 1874 fired a 45-70 government cartridge. It was deadly up to one thousand yards, but he had taken game at three times the distance. The gun was powerful enough to stop the charge of a bull moose, or put a grizzly in its place.

Reaching under his coat and shirt, he pulled out the leather medicine pouch hanging around his neck on a leather thong, kissing the pouch and whispering a quick prayer to the spirits for luck in his hunt. He also whispered a prayer to the elk god, apologizing for the life he would soon be taking and asking for forgiveness.

Every Cree hunter knew to pray to the animal spirits before taking the life of a furred brother. Failure to do so could result in sickness, or crippling rheumatism, payback for killing without offering the proper words.

Tucking the rifle under his arm, he slipped the medicine pouch back beneath his clothing and pulled on his gloves. Holding his rifle in both

hands across his chest, he continued on, following the tracks, his snowshoes allowing him to move easily along the game trail.

He had just reached a clearing when the tracks became very confusing. Here, the ground was heavily trampled and it looked like the elk herd had darted this way and that, possibly in panic, doubling back on itself and running around in a tight circle. In the end, it looked like the animals had separated and run off in different directions.

Swift Runner frowned, studying the impressions. Mixed in with the hoofprints were fecal droppings, proving something had scared the herd causing them to separate.

But what could have caused such fear? He knew from the tracks there had been two bucks and several does in the herd. Had they encountered a big cat, or a pack of wolves? Not a bear; the grizzlies were all hibernating, and would not emerge from their dens until the spring thaw.

But even if they had encountered such predators, the herd would not have run off in different directions. The bucks would have protected the does, positioning themselves at the front and rear of the pack.

As the Indian stood there, trying to decipher the puzzle at his feet, he heard a strange cry coming from the forest on the other side of the clearing. He looked up and listened carefully, feeling a tingle of fear march down his spine. At first, he thought it was the calling of a wounded deer, or a rabbit, because he knew they could both scream like a woman when in pain. But this sounded like the wailing of a human infant. He heard it again, a wavering sound, coming from the shadows beneath the towering pine trees. He squinted his eyes, trying to see better, but his gaze could not penetrate the darkness of the forest. Swift Runner stepped into the clearing, walking cautiously in the direction of the sound. Perhaps a family had gotten into trouble and needed help, and what he heard was their baby crying. If so, he had to act quickly. If another blizzard hit, they would all be trapped and have to shelter in place. The unhappy weeping came again, the noise floating on the chill air. Only this time, it did not sound like an infant. Instead, it resembled a much older child. And it came from off to his left.

It is moving.

“Hello,” Swift Runner called out, his voice sounding muffled by the surrounding forest.

He heard it again, his stomach knotting in fear for the cry sounded like his youngest daughter.

But that was impossible; his daughter was at the cabin with her mother and siblings. He had kissed the sleeping child on the forehead before leaving on the hunt.

“Hello,” came the reply of a little girl’s voice, speaking in the Algonquian dialect of his people.

It sounded exactly like his daughter. “Papa,” the voice said. He knew it was not his daughter, but something that mimicked a little girl’s voice. No bird or animal of the north woods had the talent to imitate human speech. Only one thing he knew of had the gift of mimicry, using it to lure victims deeper into the forest, leading them to their doom.

Wendigo.

The child’s voice faded out, replaced by a strained silence. It seemed the forest waited and watched with hushed anticipation.

Swift Runner slowly opened the breech of his Sharps rifle, slipping a cartridge into the chamber.

“Hello,” he said again. “Is someone there?” No reply; only the still quiet of a winter forest.

The sharp snapping of a branch suddenly echoed across the clearing, the sound coming from in front of him but high in the trees, at least twenty feet off the ground.

Swift Runner raised his rifle, aiming in the direction of the sound. The crack had been loud, the branch obviously large. It had not snapped from the weight of snow. Someone, or something, had broken it.

“Help me.”

The voice came from the same spot as the snapping branch. A woman’s voice, soft, but not afraid. The voice lacked any emotion; definitely not the voice of a woman in trouble, or someone with small children needing protection.

The skin at Swift Runner’s temples pulled tight, goosebumps breaking out along his arms. He breathed out, a cloud of steamy mist momentarily obscuring his vision. A drop of fearful sweat trickled down the side of his face.

He suddenly wanted another drink, needed it to block out the voice. He thought about the bottle in his coat pocket, but he dared not lower his rifle to reach for it, or take his gaze off the forest in front of him.

Something moved in the dark shadows beneath the trees, barely visible but much taller than a man. He saw the branches of the big pines sway as it brushed against them, pure white snow showering down. Impossibly tall and very thin, standing much higher than a grizzly on two legs, easily twelve to fifteen feet in height.

Every fiber in Swift Runner's body told him to turn around and run, forget about the hunt and flee for his life. But his feet refused to listen, and continued to compel him forward. He took a step, then two, moving as if in a dream.

My dreams.