

## ONE

Collin McAllister looked over his shoulder once more, convinced this time someone or something was really and truly watching them. Just like the last time, and the time before that, there was nothing. Trees and hard packed ground with patches of snow still lingering.

"Still jumpy, eh?" Bill Parsons called from the seat on his mule-pulled wagon. "There's a reason this part of the Sierra's isn't used much. This group must have been led by fools to take this way. The ground's haunted, they say."

"They usually say things like that," Collin agreed. "I don't tend to believe them."

Pat, the man currently at the head of this expedition, snorted. "You're jumping at shadows. By my calculations we should be near where they set up camp just before dark. Hopefully there's enough of them still alive so they can provide us a fire and maybe even food."

"From what I heard, doubt they'll have any food to spare. Why else did we bring a whole wagon full of goods?" Collin was consistently annoyed with Pat. The man was always hungry and always more concerned with his next meal, and himself in general, than the task at hand.

There were fifteen of them in all, probably not enough if the stories they had heard back in civilization were true, but it would be enough to rescue some from this group, who had foolishly left too late in the year and then had to make camp in the Sierra Nevadas when winter fell. Apparently people were too stupid to back up when they realized they had taken the wrong path and too proud to ask for help somewhere along the way.

A few of their number had made it to the cities in California, begging people to come help them rescue their families. None of them understood that if their families were trapped in the mountains during the winter, there was nothing short of God's hands that would get them out before spring.

However, as the weeks wore on, the reward offered by these people grew, but you had to sign on with them. Collin and his team wanted to be the first and did not want to be led by the same idiots who had gotten their families lost in the mountains in the first place.

Although the men he was with now were not the most reputable, all of them had experience in these mountains. All of them had led trains of people over them and knew the location where the ragged band of survivors had left their families. All of them knew it was unlikely many of those people left behind were going to be alive once any party got to them.

Still, a group of family members might also pay a price, a reward, for whatever remained of their long deceased family. Perhaps just a few bones.

It had been a hard winter, too. The snow-capped mountains told them that as they watched from the warmth below. Collin felt sorry for these people, frozen, starving, buried in feet of snow in makeshift cabins, but it was not the first time a group had been lost here and it would likely not be the last. As long as fools felt their dreams could be met in the land of California, they would come and they would die before they got there.

They pushed on until one of the scouts in the lead, a native named Nuka, called back that he had found something. Pat got excited and kicked his horse to move faster, probably hoping it was food. Collin kept his horse steady. He was still unnerved by the sensation they were being watched.

Maybe even hunted.

Collin had been up here many times in his life. There were parts of his life when being in the mountains away from everyone and everything was all he wanted to do. He had come face to face with grizzly bears three times his height and with claws big enough to tear his head off with one blow. He had been robbed by bandits, and come close to being killed by Natives who thought he was trespassing on their land. He had nearly died in avalanches. All in all, it was a glorious life and he faced it all.

He had never felt the creepy fear he felt today, until that morning.

For miles now he was sure he heard things in the woods around them which were not just animals. Things that sounded like humans. Once, he was certain he had heard a child giggling. Then there was the constant feeling of eyes on the back of his neck.

Each time he felt this, or heard these things, he would turn his head and see nothing but shadows and trees.

It took another couple of minutes for Collin to reach where others in the group were crowded around the base of a tree. Pat had his heat hanging down his back and wiped his hand across his head. Nuka crouched down at something there.

Collin dismounted and walked over. The men parted and Collin sighed once he saw what was there.

"This, you fat fuck," he said to Pat, smacking him on the shoulder, "is why they're not going to have a meal for us."

It was a human skeleton. Well, as Collin looked more closely, he saw that it was part of a human skeleton. A skull, empty eye sockets staring, most of a spine, some ribs, and leg bones. Arms, hands, feet and fingers were gone. There was no meat on the bones.

"You'd all better prepare yourself for seeing a lot more of this where we're headed." Collin studied those around him. "The likelihood is that this entire camp will be as dead as this guy. The bones of women and children may be grinning at us."

"What do you think happened?" Pat asked.

Collin shrugged. "I have no idea. Either he got dragged away from there by animals after dropping dead, or this guy tried to walk away from camp on his own and the cold got him. This is an entire community who ran out of food, most likely."

"Looks chewed," Nuka added, studying on of the rib bones.

"I'm sure it is. Every critter in the woods here has had a chance to go at this guy. The animals probably thought this was a gift from God." Collin shook his head. Did they pack up

these bones and bring them back? "I think we'd better pack up these bones, fellas. The reward is for as many as we can bring back. Dead or alive."

There was grumbling, but someone produced an empty burlap sack and they packed the bones away. Collin helped gather them up and look for more. He found what appeared to be part of an arm a few feet away. When he studied it, the bones themselves looked cracked open. It was as if whatever had eaten this person had sucked the marrow right out of these bones.

Collin felt chills run down his spine as the sensation of being watched returned with a vengeance. So much so, he whirled around, his eyes scanning the trees, searching the shadows. He saw nothing, but was sure something was there.

What animals sucked marrow out of bones? It seemed at some point he knew about such a thing, but couldn't recall.

He added the arm bone to the sack and mounted his horse. He was very tempted to just turn around and head back. He was about done with this whole situation and close to abandoning the entire expedition.

They were so close, though. So close.

Instead of turning back, he clicked his tongue and his horse set off. As the entire group trotted away Collin mused that his horse did not seem particularly nervous.

All of that went away about half an hour later, when his horse stopped, ears twitching, and did not want to move forward.

"We're here," Nuka called back to the rest. "This is the camp!"

Collin felt no joy and nothing close to the elation he had hoped he would feel. Instead, he kicked his horse to trot a bit faster and soon caught up to the rest. The entire party had stopped just outside the grouping of small cabins.

Collin knew this party of migrants had little when they stopped here for the winter. He knew they had built some shelters the best they could, in hopes of waiting out the blasting cold and snow. He had heard how they brought as much food stock together to try and keep them

through the cold and snow, but nothing prepared him for the condition these structures would be in when he found them.

The buildings had fallen over in many places. Walls had collapsed inward and the roofs of most buildings sagged or had fallen in entirely. It was deadly quiet and not a single person came to see the men who were here, ostensibly, to rescue them.

"This is more grim than I feared," Collin said.

Nuka just nodded. Pat tipped his hat back and scratched at his head once more.

"Let's head into it and see if there's anyone alive. Right now, this place looks abandoned," Collin got off his horse and grabbed the lead. "We also need to do what we can to set up camp for ourselves. It's getting dark now and we'll need to spend the night here before heading back out tomorrow."

Nuka looked concerned. "I fear this place is haunted, boss."

Collin nodded slowly, then whispered out the side of his mouth. "Me too."

Nuka grabbed his shoulder. "Have you felt it, too? I feel eyes on me. Have been feeling it for a while now."

Collin pulled the scout aside, away from prying ears. "Yes. but then there's nothing there. Just the woods."

The native scout did not show much in the way of emotion, but he cocked his head to the side. "I swear I can smell bad things in this camp. I think we should look around and get out of here. Get as far as we can and light torches to get even further if need be."

Collin studied the man's face, and knew he was one hundred percent serious. He had never known Nuka to be the type to play jokes on people. Then he looked around, saw the encroaching darkness, tried to imagine heading out into the night, navigating this group and their horses through the wilderness with just torches. He couldn't help but feel that a camp, with a fire, with the wagons as a kind of barriers, would be safer.

"I understand, but I don't want to risk it. If you feel the need to cut out, I won't stop you, and you'll still get your share of the reward. But I would prefer it if you would stay and help us." Collin stared hard into the man's dark eyes.

"I'll stay, but remember that I warned you."

Not exactly the warm feelings he was hoping to have after speaking to the scout, but it would do. They set about walking through the camp and several of the men started gathering up what wood they could find to start a fire.

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It took less than an hour to go through all of the ramshackle cabins. There were more skeletons, and most of them were in pieces or missing huge chunks of the human body. All of them had been stripped of flesh, the bones amazingly white in the dark shadows of each cabin. They gathered up what remains they could and set them outside, near the campfire.

"There's no children," Bill Parsons said after they all stood there for a short time studying the remains.

Collin almost asked him what he was talking about, but then he took a second look. There had been something nagging at him the entire time, but it wasn't until Bill said it out loud that it clicked. He was right. These were the skeletons of adults. No children. There wasn't even an infant.

"It's getting dark, but we can look again tomorrow," Collin muttered. "animals may have dragged the kids away."

It was a weak argument, but no one else seemed to have a better suggestion. They set about building the fires and gathering their supplies of meat and other food. It was a somber affair as no one felt much elation at finding a camp of the dead.

They all sat around the fire, eating, wearing blankets of animal skin.. The air had turned bitter cold, as was typical high in the mountains, despite it being early spring. Collin wished he

was back home, where it was warm, where he could get a drink at the local bar, and feel safer. The darkness came fast and encroached like a living thing against the light of the fire.

They did not talk much. Everyone looked slightly haunted, more than slightly exhausted, and very downtrodden. They had started this journey with the best of intentions (granted, getting paid was also a prime motivator), and now it appeared they had entered a camp of the dead. Although all of them knew a group of people not familiar with the mountains, mostly women and children, was not likely to have survived, they held out hope. The hope was gone and it felt as if they were eating a meal in a cemetery.

Collin was ruminating on the situation, wondering if he would manage to get even a few minutes of sleep in this cursed place, when he felt the sensation of being watched again. This time, the feeling was overwhelming and he was certain it was more than one thing, or one person, eyeing him. He took another spoonful of his stew, and turned his head slowly. For an instant, he was sure he saw something move in the deep shadows which sucked up and held as prisoners all the bits of light just a few feet from their fire.

"Do you gentlemen get the feeling we are not alone here?" He asked, trying to keep his voice calm. Loud enough for them to hear, but hopefully not loud enough for whatever was there to be spooked.

Pat nodded. "I sure as hell do. Been feeling it for a while now. I keep thinking I see movement in the darkness."

Nuka looked around. "Something's out there. Maybe there are survivors?"

Collin shook his head slowly. "I am not getting survivor feelings here. If they are, maybe they're kids. Maybe they're scared."

"I would be," Nuka admitted.

Collin tried to imagine how it would look to scared, hungry, frozen kids. All of their parents were dead. They probably had to eat whatever they could find, and the thought of what

that might be made Collin shiver. Suddenly, out scrounging for food, they come back to camp to find men, all of whom looked a bit rough around the edges, sitting in the middle of their home.

Collin stood up and turned to face the shadows. "Hey, if you're out there, we're not here to harm anyone. We're here to help."

Something within the shadows scurried away.

This was followed almost immediately by a small giggle.

"Jesus, that sure sounds like a kid," Bill whispered. "Hey, kids, if you're out there, you can come over here. If you're hungry, we have food."

"Food."

The whisper came from behind where the men had been facing. This was followed by more giggles. Several of them. Then more footsteps.

"What in the holy hell is going on here?" Pat asked, his voice rising. "It sounds like they're all around us. Hey, kids, stop messing around."

"Something's not right," Nuka whispered. When Collin glanced at the scout, he saw fear in the man's eyes."

"Food."

This time the sound came from where Collin had been facing. He saw more shapes in the shadows. This time, they were a bit closer.

One of the men (was his name Charlie? Collin could not remember) drew his pistol, held it at his side and stepped out of the circle into the shadows. Collin wanted to say something, call the guy back, but it definitely sounded like children. If it was kids, why was he so worried? Then he heard Nuka whisper behind me.

"Wendigo," the man said.

Collin knew the word and felt more chills. Superstition, he said to himself, but it did nothing to calm his fears.



"Hey, kids, if you're out there come here," The maybe-Charlie called, then he stepped a little further toward the shadows and the edge of the woods. "We're here to help you, goddammit."

More scurrying sounds came in response. The man stepped further towards the woods, now barely visible as the darkness seemed to swallow him alive. Collin also heard more soft whispers, but could not make out the words.

"We need to get outta here, boss," Nuka hissed. "Something really bad has happened."  
Collin held up a hand.

Then the man nearest the woods screamed in pain.

"Goddamnt!" He shouted into the darkness. "Something bit me!"

"What the hell?" Collin said, but it was barely loud enough for his own ears to hear.

The man, now at the very edge of the woods had turned around, was headed back into the light. He held the hand which had previously held his gun, and blood ran freely to the ground, creating soft splattering sounds like rain. He managed to make it to the edge of the light when a number of giggles erupted from the darkness behind him. The man's eyes went wide for a moment, and hands reached out from the darkness and grabbed him around his legs, torso, and arms.

"Jesus!" He cried out. "Help me!"

Then, just as suddenly as all of this had started, he was yanked backwards among the trees. The hands pulled his legs out from under him, and then he was dragged away.

That was when the real screams started.

And the sounds of meat tearing.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Pat cried out. Before anyone could do anything, he pulled out his revolver and fired three times.

Something in the dark growled.

"It's the Wendigo, boss," Nuka whispered. "it's here. You can't kill it "

What happened next happened fast.

Shapes emerged from the darkness with a speed Collin could not fathom. The images barely registered on his retinas before the men around him began to fall...and scream.

When something sharp sank into Collins right arm he cried out, barely had time to look, and then something else took his legs out from under him. He hit the ground hard, the wind knocked from his lungs. When he impacted the ground his eyes closed. When he opened them again, he stared straight into a nightmare.

It was a young boy, maybe eight-years-old. His hair was wild, sticking up all over and covered in dirt and leaves. The clothes he wore were mere rags. He smelled of manure and piss, mixed with blood and the stench of rotting meat. The boy's mouth was buried in Collin's stomach.

The pain was unlike anything he had ever felt before. He felt his insides being pulled, torn apart.

Chewed.

To his right was a young girl, perhaps a few years older than the boy, and she grabbed his arm and tore a second chunk of flesh from him. She noticed his look of terror. She smiled, blood streaming down her chin's cleft as if to fill a dry riverbed. What was left of Collin's sanity fled like doomed prey, he began to scream. The sound was loud and long and held out until another child ripped out his throat.

He screamed because when the child showed him her teeth, each one inside her blood-filled mouth ended in a sharp, wicked point. It was like looking into the mouth of a wild animal.

All the men screamed and soon the night was filled with the sounds, which eventually became gurglings. The gurgling became quiet moans and then those stopped, too.

Eventually there was just the sound of tearing meat, chewing...and giggling.