

# **THE RUGARU**

Written by

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*The Rugaru*

The body had lain where it had been roughly discarded, exposed to the dispassionate attention of the elements, for nearly two days, as the county coroner’s exam would later determine. Whatever unseen agent had acted in concert with a late summer squall to render the mortal remains of Spotted Horse, a reclusive Lakota medicine man of the Oglala band, a disturbing mélange of decaying flesh, torn sinew and pulverized bone remained to be determined. There was no mistaking that death in whatever form it had taken had found the aging yet vital elder not in some prolonged and protracted struggle, but in a moment of stunning and overwhelming ferocity.

It was Spotted Horse’s daughter who had discovered her father’s torn body not far from the trail he routinely took to his isolated camp. Spotted Horse lived on a remote corner of the reservation, preferring his simple and traditional tepee set amid a stand of old growth timber to the prefabricated and forlorn modern housing most of his people lived in. Many of the tribal council members considered Spotted Horse an anachronism, a stubborn old fool clinging to the old ways despite the fact such practices had failed to stave off the ravenous greed of the European settlers as they displaced those peoples who inconveniently stood in the path of Manifest Destiny. Yet there were those who consulted Spotted Horse quietly for interpretation of dreams, or to tap his vast knowledge of natural remedies to heal sickness, both physical and spiritual. For those who believed, Spotted Horse’s gifts were quite real, and although he lived a Spartan and severe life aloof from many of his contemporaries, when pressed many of his people expressed a grudging respect and admiration for the medicine man.

Catherine, his only daughter and sole surviving offspring, had been summoned unexpectedly by a static-filled phone call made from a public booth on a sticky August night. Although her relationship with her father had been strained and distant at times, her first instinct upon recognizing the quiet voice on the other end of the receiver had been one of genuine concern. Spotted Horse was not one for most modern conveniences, and phone calls in the middle of the night from him were quite out of the ordinary. Even more troubling for Catherine was an undercurrent that she had never before heard in her father’s tone – the unmistakable tone of fear. Spotted Horse had spoken hurriedly, racing to impart the urgency of his request before his coins ran out. Catherine tried to cut his semi-coherent account short, but her father would brook no interruption. Something very disturbing was afoot, and he would only explain himself to her if she made the long drive out to his homestead. For Catherine, the brief phone call had been an exercise in frustration, of things unspoken and perhaps unknowable. Spotted Horse made a cryptic remark about “fire that had rained from the sky” some years ago, and the “son which was lost,” which she assumed was a reference to her brother, dead all these years, incinerated in a fiery car crash that also claimed her mother. Why her father should be summoning these ghosts now she didn’t understand – was this some prelude to dementia? Her father had seemed well enough her past visit, some three or four months ago, and it seemed inconceivable that for all his eccentricities, her father’s mind could have lost its grip on reality in such rapidly dramatic fashion.

Nevertheless, Catherine had called the hospital and told them that she would need to take a few days for personal reasons, so they should find another doctor to cover the

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ER in her absence. She had quickly packed up a few belongings and thrown them in the back of the Subaru before embarking on the long drive from her home in Minneapolis to the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. As she drove, she replayed the mostly one-sided conversation over and over in her head, trying to gain some additional insight into her father’s mental state amid the popping and crackling of a poor connection.

*“Catherine... It’s been some time.”*

*“What time is it? Where are you?”*

*“You must come as quickly as you can. They suspect me now.”*

*“Papa, what are you talking about? Is everything all right?”*

*“Fire rained down from the sky, before you were born. I think I’ve found what was lost.”*

*“What do you mean? What fire? Are you okay?”*

*“You must come. Now. There isn’t much time.”*

*“Papa, it’s the middle of the night. You’re scaring me.”*

*“Hurry. Before others find the sun which was lost.”*

The sudden sharp buzz of the dial tone had jerked Catherine fully awake, as she realized the connection was lost. She had attempted to call back the number displayed on her caller ID, but the line gave a steady busy tone and she gave up after several agonizing minutes and stumbled for the shower.

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Spotted Horse’s campsite was a good half-mile from the nearest dirt-packed road that would be considered navigable with even a four-wheel drive vehicle. Catherine

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shouldered her pack and locked her car, glancing around the edge of the heavily timbered forest that encroached on man’s attempt to establish his own order on nature’s design. She groaned inwardly at her father’s stubborn refusal to consider living in a more accessible location. He actually prided himself on the fact that he could live alone, “off even the Indian’s beaten path,” as he liked to say, only occasionally venturing out every few weeks to the trading post to pick up those staples that he could not provide for himself, such as coffee, sugar and chocolate. Despite herself, Catherine smiled at the memory of her father’s love for chocolate, particularly the rich dark chocolate favored by Europeans. It was one of his few concessions to the outside world, as most of his food came from the small garden that he rigorously maintained and from the meat of a variety of game animals that he harvested with either his traps and snares or the .30-30 lever action rifle that represented yet another concession to more modern progress.

Catherine began carefully picking her way along the trace that would eventually meander to the campsite. Originally a game trail that followed the natural contours of the rolling terrain, over the years it had been worn smooth by the tread of countless steps taken by visitors to the camp or her father’s own excursions back and forth to what passed as civilization on the reservation. As she walked, Catherine contemplated her own reasons for leaving as soon as she was able; the college scholarship that allowed her to escape the poverty and dead-end despair that had ensnared so many others less fortunate or determined. She had always been a bright and inquisitive child, traits encouraged by her father and allowed to blossom in a childhood that while not idyllic, had largely been happy until the moment a drunk driver crossed a two-lane blacktop and plowed into the

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pickup her mother was driving with her little brother beside her. Naturally, the drunk had walked away from the wreck, but such a reprieve was not granted to her own kin. Catherine was eleven years old at the time, and overnight she found herself trying to care not only for her own needs, but those of her father as well, who was shattered by the tragedy. Spotted Horse, who had earned a living for the family as a mechanic and welder, increasingly withdrew from society, drawn more strongly than ever to the medicine man training that he had begun under Laughing Crow, an Oglala elder who had recognized promise in the young man. Within months of the accident, Spotted Horse had devoted himself nearly full-time to walking the spirit road with the mystically-inclined Laughing Crow, learning the secret ways of the shaman. Catherine found herself in a state of benign neglect, her father absent for days at a time from their modest trailer which he would eventually abandon for the ascetic comfort of the tepee when his daughter went off to college.

Catherine’s dark ruminations were replaced by the memory of the utter strangeness of the call that had summoned her with little explanation and no forewarning. Something about the exchange still troubled her, although she could not quite place her finger on it. Certainly, the inflection in her father’s voice had been disturbing, and the content both cryptic and obtuse, but there was something more, tantalizingly close yet darting just out of reach the more she recalled what transpired.

*“Fire rained down from the sky, before you were born,” her father’s voice mockingly echoed.*

Catherine was only peripherally aware of an event that might fit this description. It had occurred during the height of the Vietnam War, more than a year after her father’s own tour of Southeast Asia. Like many of his generation, her father had been swept up in the draft, and although leery of the patriotic fever that took hold of some men and glorified the horrors of war, he had apparently served with distinction as a member of a long-range reconnaissance team attached to the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne. Her father had never spoken much of his service to her growing up, as if the man who had gone off to war in some faraway land was not the same who returned to his people more than a year later. In fact, the only reason Catherine knew anything about his time in the Army was from an album and personal effects that her mother had carefully put away in a small footlocker, which she discovered in the days following her death. It wasn’t until years later that Catherine understood the meaning of the Silver Star medal that she found in its presentation box, looking as if it had been minted the day before her discovery. Her father had apparently done something quite heroic to merit the nation’s third highest honor for bravery in military service, yet he had never spoken of this to her. And yet she had learned from her mother that her father had endured nightmares triggered by “the fire that rained down from the sky” within a year of his return, perhaps some sign of post-traumatic stress.

Spotted Horse had been out on a hunting trip, in a remote section of the Black Hills that were a sacred destination for the Lakota. In an incident largely overshadowed by other turbulent events of 1968, a B-52 bomber on a training mission had tragically collided with an aerial tanker during a night refueling, resulting in the deaths of both

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crews. Pieces of flaming wreckage had rained down on the hills for miles around, some landing on public land, a few on the outer fringes of the reservation proper. The military had shown a keen interest in the weeks following the crash, with teams of soldiers and civilians whose dress and appearance screamed “federal agents” combing the hills. There were whispers that the reason for such activity was that the bomber had been carrying a nuclear bomb in its belly, a charge the Air Force vehemently denied. After a few weeks, the military had either found what it was looking for or had given up, for the soldiers and the unfriendly civilians departed as quickly as they had come, like a plague of locusts. Gradually memories of this event had faded, as the increasing radicalism of AIM had led to the tragic showdown with the FBI less than a decade later, resulting in the deaths of two agents and the destruction of many other lives through bitter court battles and recriminations.

It was the smell that pulled Catherine from her reverie, and brought her immediately into the present. A sickly sweet smell, one that she had encountered enough times in her medical career to understand intuitively. Death stalked nearby, and the scent was the lingering and tangible proof of its passage. Still, nothing in her life to date quite prepared Catherine for what she stumbled upon as she rounded a blind corner of the trail. Spotted Horse lay sprawled in the underbrush just off the trail, his neck twisted at a grotesque angle and the unmistakable evidence of animal predation apparent in a gaping wound just above the collarbone.

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Catherine didn't remember screaming, but she must have, because her voice was raw and hoarse when she finally flagged down a passing motorist on a reservation road nearly an hour later.

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Special Agent Daniel Sterling of the Federal Bureau of Investigation was in a foul mood. He'd been assigned to the investigation into the murder of one Michael “Spotted Horse” Clark, a member of the Oglala band of the Lakota who was apparently held in some regard as a medicine man. The circumstances of the man's death were bizarre, to say the least, and he wasn't terribly confident that the integrity of the crime scene had been maintained. As it was, the victim's body had been discovered by his daughter, some doctor out of Minneapolis who apparently only saw her father infrequently and was not taking too well to being considered a “person of interest” in the investigation. Daniel was actually on his way to interview the daughter, following a short reconnaissance of the crime scene.

What he'd found, even upon cursory inspection, was troubling. During his time among the Navajo, after the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, where he'd gone to honor a promise to his closest friend and found some measure of peace, he'd learned to read sign. This was prior to his time with the Bureau, and since his volunteering for the Indian Country program, he'd put his tracking skills to use on several occasions. But what he found around the position where the victim's body had been tossed defied logical explanation. There were, of course, the tracks of the daughter, and mingled among them the tracks of the tribal police and emergency workers that had responded to the distress

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call. But it was a trail that he'd picked up after walking in increasingly wide circles around the site that had created the doubt in his mind and introduced the possibility of outside contamination. As it was the reservation would soon be buzzing with his discovery, which had escaped the attention of those first on the scene and then deeply shaken the officers accompanying his visit. Because several yards from where the mortal remains of Spotted Horse had been discarded, separated by strides that Daniel couldn't even come close to matching, were the deep impressions of impossibly large bare human-like feet. Whoever had chosen to play such a grim practical joke had now muddied the waters considerably, and Daniel was irritated because even those who should know better were whispering that it was bad medicine to have disturbed the *rugaru*, the Big Man who comes to the people in hairy humanoid form during times of impending trouble...

To Be Continued...