

AUSTINA  
LOVE

SWEET HITCHHIKER  
*Rain Riders*

Summoned from beyond the grave, the Rain Riders strike terror into the men chasing Shye. But will she get her farm back before the angered spirits kill the man holding the deed?

Drug runners have taken over Shye's land in an underhanded scheme. Even worse, a man she'd called a friend has issued an ultimatum. With only seven days to make a life changing decision, she struggles to find a way out and Trip worries that she's in too deep. His attempts to protect her fail when the Ghost Dancer calls to her again. Will Shye want to come back after riding with spirits of the greatest warriors in history?

While preparing the soil for their new crops, a group of cynical men defile an ancient Native American burial ground. What they unearth amuses them as they make plans to sell the artifact for big money. Their greed invokes a supernatural force unlike any other. Can they undo their mistake before the Rain Riders take their souls?

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Rain Riders  
Sweet Hitchhiker 4

By

Austina Love

*For my beloved Austin whose spirit lights my way.*

*With respect to my Native American ancestors most of whom I have never met. While writing this book I heard the drums of my past and experienced a reawakening in my soul. Though I do not resemble them in appearance, their spirit is in my blood. Visions I saw can only be attributed to my connection to those who walked before me.*

*Everything I describe regarding Native Americans in this book came from my imagination and visions from my mind.*

*Special thank you to my readers. My wish is that you feel the story and become swept away by the mystical aura I felt when writing it.*

*To Jay, thank you for everything.*

## Chapter One

“Hey, Draven, you should take a look at this.”

Pike turned his head sharply. “Just get back to work. We’re not out here to piss around. If we don’t get the last of these seeds in before the next rain we may not have a crop to sell. Carter’s incompetence already set us back.” He studied the men in his crew for a second. They had all gathered in a tight circle and were openly fascinated by something.

“I’m serious, man, this thing is cool. Looks like it’s been here a long time.”

At that, Pike’s interest piqued. Dollar signs flashed before his eyes. Casually he strolled over to the group, not wanting to look overly interested in their find. So far the cultivating had gone slow. Clearing plots of ground in the thicket was much more difficult than plowing an open field. But they couldn’t plant their crops in plain view. *No...cash crops of this nature needed a bit of camouflage.*

"What do ya have?" He nudged his way into the circle. "A stick? You stopped working to play with a damn stick? I swear all you lazy asses have done is piss around looking for useless Indian relics."

"No...listen..." Aiden, one of the workers, held the long stick up then slowly flipped it end over end. "Sounds like water. We found it while digging over there." He pointed to a patch of mossy soil in the thicket. "It was buried under layers of rocks and practically molded to the ground. I can't believe what awesome condition this piece is in."

Pike moved in for a closer look. The stick was about four feet long and resembled a tall thin cactus thick enough to wrap one hand around. Upon closer inspection he noticed many tiny holes where the cactus spines had been. Both ends were sealed with a carved handle on one end while the other end was blunt as if used for walking.

"What the hell is it?" he asked, captivated by the sound it made when turned upside down and back again.

"A rain stick," Aiden replied. "Native Americans use them in dances to summon rain. But I've never seen one crafted like this. It looks ancient. Rain sticks made today are more polished and decorative. This one is extremely primitive, yet skillfully made."

"Really...let me see that thing." Pike said with skepticism, taking the peculiar branch into his own hands. "I don't buy into those Indian legends, nothing but tales of old men." He scoffed while giving the stick a good going over. It definitely felt and looked like cactus tree and in spite of its age was still solid and carried a slight sheen. "Wonder what they used to preserve it and how they got it to sound like water's inside."

"I have no idea what could've preserved it this long. But the way they create the unique sound is by pushing the cactus needles through the branch." Aiden used one finger to direct his attention to the numerous pinholes. "The branches are hollow so before sealing them the craftsman would place pebbles inside, then seal it back up with a handle on top and a solid piece on the bottom. The cactus needles and pebbles rolling from end to end emulate the sound of rain. Typically, something like this wouldn't have survived buried in soil all these years. It must carry powerful medicine to remain perfectly preserved for so long."

Pike shot Aiden a curious look. "How do you know so much?"

"I've lived in the Black Hills all my life. Been to a lot of Native American gatherings. Have a lot of Indian friends. You didn't tell us this land had been owned by them."

"Eh, just some Indian chick and her family. Not



like a whole tribe lived here."

Aiden raised questioning brows. "You don't find handmade instruments used in ceremony just anywhere. Pieces like this are usually crafted by a medicine man or tribal elder, then buried with them when they leave this world to join their ancestors."

"What are you saying? That we've stumbled upon a priceless artifact?"

With a shake of his head, Aiden's expression deepened. "What I'm saying is that we've disturbed sacred ground. This had to have been a burial site and we've gone and desecrated it. I suggest we place the stick back where we found it and move our crops to another part of the property."

"Yeah right." Pike laughed. "One—this is the most remote place on the farm and two, the soil is perfect. We've got just enough tree coverage to hide the crops yet let in sufficient sun. I'm not moving the site just because you found one old Indian relic." He flipped the stick again, only slower this time to hear the needles inside fall from one end to the other and mimic the sound of rain. "And we're not putting it back. Whoever owned this thing is long gone... they won't need it now." His comment drew laughter from the other men. "This little find is probably worth some serious money."

"You're joking, right?" Aiden reached for the stick. "We should put it back and hope the spirits will overlook the disturbance."

"Hell no." Pike jerked the instrument away. "Keep working. Maybe we'll find more valuable shit in this Indian backland."

"Forget you!" Aiden backed away. "I already put my ass on the line taking this job. I used to lease this land to plant corn. When Carter took over this farm he put me out of work. I have a wife and kids to consider. I'm not placing them in harm's way. I'll find another job somewhere."

"You're gonna give up all this money because of some Indian relic?"

The look in Aiden's eyes was somewhat unsettling. "Ain't no amount of money worth losing your soul to the Rain Riders."

"Say what?" Pike arched his brows in disbelief. "You really let those redskins get inside your head, man." He cast a glance over his crew. "If any of you pussies feel the same as Aiden here, speak up now or get back to work. We've already stalled enough."

The men looked from one to the other then at Aiden. One more crewmember stepped from the group. "I'd rather play it safe," he said. "I've got a sweet little fiancé. I'm not willing to take more risks than I already have."

"Anyone else?" Pike bellowed while glaring at

the two cowards.

Nobody else spoke up. They shook their heads and moved back.

"Good, now get your asses back to work. I want these seeds in by dusk." He turned toward Aiden and the other man. "I don't usually allow men to leave once they've signed on. But since this might be a religious thing you can go. I don't need trouble with spiritual leaders and such. You know the deal. Keep your damn mouths shut about everything including this rare relic here." He gave the stick a shake. "If I find out you've uttered a word, your ass will be mine, got it?"

The two of them nodded in silence.

"Now get the hell out and don't look back," Pike told them.

They made haste leaving the area and disappeared within minutes over the sloping hills.

"Wusses," he muttered under his breath while walking over to the site to have a look around. "If anyone stumbles across more Indian items, I want to see them. This land does not belong to you so don't get any stupid ideas of stealing valuable finds. Anything found gets turned over to me."

"The farm doesn't belong to you either," one man dared to point out.

"I'm the boss. Just because I don't hold the deed doesn't mean shit. Gage wouldn't have a clue on how to run this business without me so don't any

of you forget it."

A flurry of nods and surreptitious looks spread among the group but they relented and returned to working the ground. Pike supervised the handling of seeds and kept a close eye out for any more archeological finds. The day wore on with no additional discoveries. As the sun sunk into the western Dakota skies, a blood red moon took its place, inching into the dusky horizon. Pike decided to call it a day.

"All right, let's clean up and clear out," he ordered.

Quickly and in orderly fashion the crew finished their current tasks then made sure no tools or visible evidence of their presence had been left behind before hopping into the back of the pickup truck. Pike tossed the rain stick onto the seat beside him and drove everyone down to the house.

Gage was waiting when they parked near the front porch and piled out of the truck. "What's that you're carrying?"

"Ah, some Indian relic the men found while digging up the soil," Pike replied with a casual shrug. "Aiden got spooked and took off, him and another guy."

"What if they talk?"

"Everyone who works for me knows what happens if they go shooting off at the mouth."

"That branch must be something significant if two of your men got spooked and walked off the job. They won't find money like this anywhere else around here."

"Aiden's been living among the Indians too long." Pike laughed. "He's all brainwashed into thinking some ancient relic buried with them is gonna stir up the dead or something. He was babbling about this stick and other bullshit. I figured this little find might bring in a nice price at auction." He held up the rain stick and flipped it over. "Check it out... gotta hand it to those natives, they made pretty cool shit at times. Never saw anything like this."

A shadowy expression traversed Gage's face but he held the stick anyway. "Yeah... it is a very fascinating piece. Where were you digging?"

"In the southwest corner, the least likely place to receive attention. The area also has ultimate conditions for thriving crops."

"Out of over a hundred acres you couldn't find anywhere else to plant?" Gage shifted his weight nervously and his voice rose a little. "Shye's family had a private cemetery back there. This farm has been in her family for generations that go back too far to trace. Who knows how many of her ancestors were put to rest in that burial site."

"What is it with you people and Indian burial sites?" Pike stomped past him. "The seeds are

planted. We've been working sunrise to sunset every day to get the crops going. You want it moved, you do the work."

"Here, take this." Gage shoved the stick at him. "I'm a lawyer not a field worker. You wanted land and financing, I provided it. I want no part of disturbing a family burial ground."

Pike whipped around. "Don't forget how much profit you stand to make by your part in all of this. You're the one who convinced Carter to front the startup cash and it was your idea to trick the little Indian chick out of her land so we'd have a better place to operate." He gripped the spiny branch while leaning on it. "Speaking of which, there's something strange about that woman."

"Like what?"

"I saw her that day..." His thoughts drifted. "Never mind...ya know this old piece of crafted cactus would make a nice walking stick. If I didn't think it was worth a mint, I'd keep it for myself."

"What do you know about Shye?" Gage persisted.

Pike studied him for a minute then smirked. "That she's got it bad for her rebel biker boyfriend. You better have some damn good tricks up your sleeve to bring that woman under control. She's a wild one."

"I have an edge. Shye is more loyal to her aging parents than some passing fancy. She won't

choose Trip Viper over her own family. And her seven day grace period ends tomorrow."

He shook the stick at him in a mocking gesture. "Let's hope you bring her in before the ghosts come a calling." He let out a sardonic laugh. "Maybe we should gather around the fire after dinner and do a little rain dance. We sure as hell need the rain. What do ya think, Gage... think this rain stick carries some of that Indian magic?"

Gage took a couple steps back. Apprehension filled his eyes. "How do you know that's a rain stick?"

"Aiden seemed to know all about it. He damn near gave me a history lesson before the wuss bolted. He's afraid of losing his soul to some *Rain Riders*," he replied with another cynical laugh. "We're better off without the two girlies who are afraid of a little piece of wood."

"*Rain Riders*?" Gage repeated.

"Eh, some nonsense Aiden babbled about before he left." He cocked one brow and gave a hard stare. "Don't tell me you believe all that bullshit, too?"

"I've heard of them. Most Native Americans in these parts are well aware of the legend behind them."

"What? Are you getting cold feet, too?"

"No. I'm counting on Shye to join us and the land belongs to me. Just get rid of that thing. I

don't want her thinking I had anything to do with violating her family's resting place."

"I don't need you going soft on me." Pike wrinkled his mouth in a frown. "I plan on selling this thing anyway so relax...Shye will never know."

"I'm surprised you're taking this so lightly. Wasn't your father a Native American?"

"And your point is?"

Gage backed off. "Nothing...just thought you'd give a little more weight to matters such as this."

"Weak legends." Pike scoffed. "I have no tolerance for weak fools." He took his prize and walked inside.

The others were already gathered around the table eating sandwiches and cold potato salad. He wished the little Indian woman Shye would agree to join them so they'd have decent hot meals and maybe something more. She'd refused his first invitation in a rather hostile manner. *Perhaps Gage will have better luck*, he thought.

He was glad he hadn't revealed what he'd seen—that Shye had seemingly walked through a solid brick wall then vanished without a trace the day Carter went down for robbing the bank. For reasons that eluded him, Pike had chosen to remain secretive about her peculiar activities. As if by keeping her secrets, or perhaps knowing something Gage did not, made him feel closer to



her. Or maybe knowing a dark secret about little Miss Shye would give *him* an edge that Gage lacked or that his discretion would gain her favor once the competition had been eliminated.

He couldn't deny his fierce attraction to the raven-haired seductress. Every day that passed found her consuming more of his thoughts. The urge to lay her down was overwhelming at times. Though he knew he was a scoundrel he'd never force himself on a woman. He'd never had trouble luring them into his bed. Shye, however, was a different story – fiery and a fighter.

*That woman has shadows in her eyes! I must uncover her secrets and have her as my own.*

From the first day she'd gazed up at him with those big black eyes he'd wanted her. And the way she'd fought turned him on. *No fear!* He admired her strength in the midst of chaos. Weak people sickened him. His parents had been weak. Carter was pathetic and Gage bordered on something in between. If he didn't need the land, he'd have found a way to remove the uptight attorney from the equation.

Gage didn't pose a threat to his chances with Shye though—everyone around knew that Gage wanted Shye, but the stunning hot-bodied vixen didn't want him. Pike also respected that in her. *The woman shows no fear and knows what she wants. My kind of woman...if only Trip Viper hadn't rolled*

*onto the scene. That prick has been a pain in my ass for too long now.*

After grabbing a plate of food he wandered back outside to sit on the porch and eat alone. Slivers of moonlight skittered across the wood planks and a light breeze ushered away some of the intense late July heat.

Visions of Shye flooded his mind. Wild, feisty, and gorgeous with a long mane of black hair and a killer body, she exemplified everything he wanted in a woman. He visualized her long naturally tan legs wrapped around him but stopped there. *No use torturing myself again.* He sighed. *Once Gage brings her on board I'll make my move. Then Viper will be the last one in the way.* A fight he knew would be vicious as his old nemesis was a tough opponent, but a battle well worth taking to win the Indian woman.

*Enjoy her now, Viper, the storm is about to come and you're way outnumbered this time.*

## Chapter Two

Shye leaned back on bent elbows, watching Trip as he took one last swim for the day in the lake behind Dax Remle's cabin. He swam toward her using broad strokes over the shimmering water with his powerful arms. She smiled and knew her eyes had to be dancing with delight as her gaze remained fixed on him. He rose from the water slowly as he came ashore. Moonlight cast an ethereal glow on his glistening body—muscular and tanned. His appearance stole her breath.

From the soaked strands of long black hair that fell wickedly over eyes like midnight and a ruggedly handsome face to his sexy lean legs, he was without a doubt the most alluring man she'd ever laid eyes on. She sighed and let her gaze drift over the broad chest and rippling six-pack abs. Then her eyes dipped lower to an impressive package of masculinity positioned nicely between his softly haired thighs. Not an ounce of flab on his fabulous body. His biceps flexed as he toweled

dry, drawing her focus toward his magnificent arms.

"You're tan has become much darker over the past weeks." She gazed dreamily at him and sighed again.

An easy smile swept over his face. "Now perhaps my skin tone will match yours." He stretched out on the grass beside her. They were both still naked from their moonlight swim.

"Be careful," she cautioned with a teasing wink. "People may begin thinking you're Native American."

"I've no problem with that. At least your mother would not have reason to cuss at me." He laughed.

Shye held back a laugh. "Ah yes, *Ina*, she does not like the *wasicu*... I'm sorry she gave you a hard time."

"Don't be." He brushed her cheek with the back of one hand. "She has a right to be angry with the white men after what they did. I've been called worse."

"They really liked you by the time we left."

"I know, babe, and I like them too. Soon, we will give them the greatest gift. We will give their land back to them." His hungry gaze swept over her naked body, making her tingle.

"I hope so," she said. "I've enjoyed this past week so much, spending time up here with you

and Remle. He is a pretty cool dude."

"He's the best friend I've ever had," Trip said. "And he respects the hell out of you or he wouldn't have shared his secret arsenal with us."

"He has some really impressive weaponry. But we still have not come up with a plan on how to deal with Gage. Tomorrow will mark a week since he issued the ultimatum. He'll be expecting my return to town with an answer to his proposal."

"Remember I said let them come and we'll be waiting."

"Yes, but I don't like the idea of leading them here to Remle's private hideaway."

Trip's expression intensified as his eyes searched hers. "We are better prepared here than riding onto the farm. Believe me...if Gage drags his crew up here none of them will be leaving to give away the location."

"A firefight?" Her stomach tightened over the ramifications of such a fight.

"I've been waiting for Pike to slip up just once." His jaw muscles twitched. "He's such an evasive bastard that I've not been able to catch him in the clear. Gage won't ride up here alone. He'll want his muscle along and that's when we'll take them down."

"I take it you've been thinking about this without telling me."

His expression softened. "I'm sorry, but yeah. I

didn't want to ruin the week of peace we had together by talking about them."

"I understand." She gave him a soft, relenting smile. "This has been the best week of my life thus far. I am concerned about one aspect of your plan though."

"What's that, babe?" He let one finger trail downward between her breasts and over her bare stomach.

She drew a longing breath and did her best to remain focused. "If Gage is killed in the fight how will I get the deed to my family's farm back?"

Trip stared at her for a few minutes then replied. "Remle and I have that covered. We agreed that Gage should stay and help us clear up some legal matters at hand."

"You want to hold him hostage?" Her eyes opened wide.

"Nah, I'd never break the law." He gave her a wink that sent shivers through her. "We'll make him our guest. I feel pretty confident that once Gage's thugs are out of commission, the man will be in a more negotiating mood. He is a lawyer after all. I imagine he's fairly intelligent."

"You *have* been devising a plan all this time."

"Would you expect any less from an ex-Marine?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm impressed. Actually I'm a little embarrassed. With my strong

military background I shouldn't have been lazing around when we have pressing matters to attend."

"No worries, love." Kind reassurance laced his voice. "Your skills will be needed soon enough. I wanted you to let down before we face them so your mind is clear."

"You're a wise leader."

"Ah...just looking out for my woman. I'm not overly thrilled about you even taking part in this fight."

"But...you know we need the extra firepower," she added. "And my training as a weapons specialist is a definite edge over our enemy."

"You read my mind but I did not plan on getting into this until later. For now, enjoy this night with me." He brushed his lips over hers.

She gazed into the depths of his decadently seductive eyes. He stared back, penetrating her soul with just a look. An ache of desire that had been building now welled inside. Sliding both hands into the satiny black locks hanging down on either side of her face, she pulled him close to feel those oh-so-kissable lips touch hers again.

A deep sigh escaped him as he sunk into the kiss, filling her mouth with his tongue. He tasted good – fresh and masculine like he always did. A few moments into the kiss he slid strong arms beneath her back and pulled her into an intimate embrace. Lying on the cool dew-misted grass

beneath a beguiling moon, the aura surrounding them was nothing less than enchanting.

She'd reached a greater level of comfort with him since the first time they'd made love. No longer shy over being naked with him, she realized he'd gently stripped her inhibitions away to engage in an entire conversation while completely unclothed. His easy, natural manner set her at ease. The outside world simply melted away while in his arms.

His breathing became heavier as gentle hands moved over her, making every inch of her body spark to life at his deft touch.

Lifting his head just far enough so their eyes met, he stared down through half-closed eyes and sensually parted lips. Strands of unruly hair fell over his eyes. "I need you, angel. I'm aching to feel all of you," he purred soft and low.

She gasped at the *make love to me* expression painted on his face. "Take me," she whispered with an easy shift of her weight under his.

He didn't break eye contact. She sucked in a sharp breath as he filled her with male sex. Nothing had ever felt this good. She gasped again as he began to move with deliberate thrusts all the while gazing at her—into her with those killer eyes.

Shye had difficulty focusing on the



conversation with Trip and Remle once back in the cabin. Their deeply passionate lovemaking beside the lake still held her emotions captive. Every few minutes Trip would give her a wink and flash a dazzling smile as they chatted with his friend. Each time his hand brushed her leg beneath the table, flutters filled her stomach. She could tell that their intimate encounter had lingered with him as well. They could hardly stop gawking at one another long enough to speak with Remle yet matters needed discussed before dawn.

“Do you feel confident with all the weapons I’ve shown you?” Remle asked her.

His blue eyes sparkled with awareness and she felt heat flood her cheeks. Clearly he noticed the passionate afterglow between her and Trip.

“Yes, I do. There aren’t many weapons that I can’t handle.”

Remle shook his head and raked one hand through his long blond hair then shot Trip a glance. “Good thing you found her first, my friend, or I’d be asking her to stay here with me. Nothing turns me on more than a woman who loves to play with ammo.”

Trip let out a casual laugh. “You’re not her type anyway. She’s too fast for you, old friend.”

The two men laughed as if sharing an inside joke. Shye imagined they had quite a few unspoken methods of communicating after

serving in the military together. She recalled how surprised she'd been to learn that Remle had been Trip's platoon leader. They exhibited a bond, which seemed deep and she liked that Trip had at least one friend he could trust. Losing his brother the way he did surely had left scars that would never heal.

Sitting in quiet observation, she listened to their casual banter, then the talk of how they'd handle Gage and his crew when they arrived. She wondered if Gage had really meant what he said about coming after her if she didn't show up in seven days with a decision. There was no way she'd agree to marry him after discovering he was the mastermind behind the entire scheme to steal her land.

She had considered going through the nuptials just to gain partial ownership of the farm then find a way to have Gage taken out. But that plan carried way too many risks and potential fail factors. So until tonight she hadn't any ideas on how they'd handle this predicament with Gage – an old friend of the family who had become their worst enemy. With a shake of her head, she sighed.

"What's wrong?" Trip asked.

"Hm? Oh... I'm sorry. I was just thinking about how my parents trusted Gage and how things have changed."

He placed a hand over hers. "Don't worry, we'll get them all."

\* \* \* \*

Pike watched with disdain as his crew danced around a campfire taking turns with the rain stick. "You've all had too much booze and look like a bunch of idiots."

"Hey you wanted rain for the crops. We're just helping out," one man chortled.

"Yeah well you won't catch me hopping around looking like some Indian. There ain't no magic in that stick. Just bring the damn thing here before ya break it."

"You should loosen up once in a while, Draven. Have some fun. Money's good but it's not everything."

Pike shook his head and scowled. "Let me hear you say that on payday when I withhold your cut for destroying my property."

"Fine, you old tight ass, here's your precious rain stick." He dropped it at his feet. "Don't go taking away the whiskey or you'll be harvesting alone."

"Drink yourselves into a stupor for all I care. Just be ready to work in the morning." Pike lifted the stick off the ground and laid it in the bed of the pickup, then propped himself on the tailgate to

enjoy the cool night air.

Tomorrow Shye would be back on the scene according to what Gage had said. He assumed the man intended to blackmail her somehow to gain her cooperation and wondered just how he planned on doing so. The woman seemed tough as nails and not likely easily persuaded. *What could Gage offer her that could force her to walk away from Viper?* He shrugged while lighting a smoke. Whatever the deal, as long as the pretty little Indian came back within reach suited him just fine. *And if she walks away from Viper to accept Gage's terms, even better. The lawyer will be much easier to remove than the bounty hunter.*

Everything seemed to be falling to his favor. He smiled to himself while enjoying his cigarette.

Glancing at the rain stick, he studied it for several minutes while his thoughts churned. If Shye rides back into town tomorrow and sees this, matters could become complicated. He decided to take a ride out to an auctioneer and look into selling the relic. His crew would begin work on renovating the barn into a more suitable place to conduct business and Gage would be busy with Shye. *This may be my only chance to sell the old thing before anything gets in my way.*

He picked it up and toyed around, flipping it end over end in slow motion to hear the cactus needles slide back and forth. Though he rejected

everything about his Native American heritage, the rain stick intrigued him. He did his best to ignore the half-breed blood cursing his veins.

Recollections of the black horse running him down the first day he caught Shye flashed through his mind. There was definitely an uncanny aura surrounding the woman. She appeared and disappeared in the most baffling way. He was determined to uncover the mystical veil guarding her.

"Hey, Draven!" one of the men called. "I think that stick is working." He pointed toward the southwest. "Looks like rain is rolling in. Keep doing what you're doing."

Pike glanced at the cactus branch in his hand then at the night skies. Clouds—strange clouds had begun to form in the distance. He watched them take shape, unable to tear himself away. *Something isn't right*, he thought. Yet instead of taking cover he slid off the tailgate and walked toward them for a closer look.

"You guys better head inside," he muttered. "I think we're in for a storm... maybe a tornado."

They chuckled and laughed off his warning then continued partying around the fire. Flashes of light began streaking across the horizon, illuminating the darkness for seconds at a time. In those brief flashes he noticed the cloud formation become more organized. Rain began to fall.

"See?" The same man threw his hands up. "You wanted rain for the seeds we planted...here it comes."

"We're gonna get more than rain..." He stood captivated by the most bizarre storm configuration he'd ever seen.

The moon turned an eerie shade of red and strangely enough the clouds didn't conceal it. A reddish black hue transformed the black sky into a ghastly color. Vivid streaks of light veined from cloud to cloud. Thunder rumbled overhead but not the thunder of a storm. The sound was more of a rhythmic din—unlike the off and on peals of thunder associated with typical storms.

He cocked his head to one side, simply standing in one spot, riveted to the scene unfolding before him. Another intense flash of lightning shattered the darkness.

Then he saw *them*.

"Holy shit..." His feet felt frozen to the ground.

The men turned abruptly and looked up too. Shouts of panic rang through the air as they watched the riders come. His crew scattered, taking off in all directions as the clouds ushered in black horses carrying what appeared to be Indian warriors. The horses' hooves touched down just below the tree line and they barreled through the field snorting fiery breaths. The heavens opened up to release bands of rain so forceful they sliced

at his bare arms like tiny knives.

He suddenly realized that Aiden had been right and raced back to the pickup. With his heart pounding in his ears and the rain stick clutched in one hand, he dove under the truck. The sound of thundering hooves split the night and among them he heard the drums. His mind reeled.

*How can I be hearing drums in the midst of this rain and those wild horses?*

Yet he did.

They were as loud as if the one playing was sitting next to him. Foreign chanting rose amidst the chaos followed by ear-splitting shrieks of the men attempting to flee. Taking tight hold of an axle, Pike pulled himself up far enough to steal a peek. His mouth dropped open. One of his crewmembers was running for his life with a massive black steed chasing him down. A warrior straddled the horse's bare back while waving a weapon of some sort. He had a hard time bringing it into focus.

"Bloody hell," he muttered. "That's not a weapon he's holding...it's a rain stick...like this one."

What he saw next he knew would be forever etched in his mind. The warrior gave a loud whooping sound from his mouth while closing in on the man.

*Poor Nate, run, man...run!*

His silent pleas did nothing. Nate glanced back to see the rider swing his long stick like a sickle. A look of sheer terror flashed through Nate's eyes seconds before the warrior struck. He didn't even have time to scream. His body instantly turned black like a shadow—then crumbled as dust before the wind and rain carried his soul away.

Pike watched in horror as Nate's silhouette rode off into the storm on the back of that fiery looking horse with the warrior driving it on.

As the screaming died down he became aware that whoever had not escaped had been taken by whatever had ridden in. When the storm cleared—only silence remained. Pike lay under the truck shaking uncontrollably. He'd never believed in the spirit world, ghosts, or Indian legends.

What he'd just witnessed was without a doubt supernatural. The Rain Riders had come and exacted their punishment just as Aiden had feared—he'd been wise to walk away. Assuming they'd fulfilled their mission—Pike crawled from beneath the truck and did his best to compose himself.

*How the hell am I going to explain this?* He wondered if anyone else had survived and if they had, would they be willing to talk about what just went down? If not, he'd have to remain silent for fear of appearing foolish or even worse, weak.



## Chapter Three

Shye sat quietly while listening to Trip and Remle wrap up details on handling the pending invasion. Her thoughts began to drift and she wondered why. Bothered by her inability to remain focused on their conversation, she began to get restless. The beating of drums and familiar chanting sounded in the distance.

*Nagi... Howiwacipi...* She recognized the call. *Shadow...the Ghost Dancer.* The spirit world was summoning her.

"I have to go," Shye said out of the blue.

"What?" Trip's brows shot up as he looked at her.

"It's the Ghost Dancer...she's calling me...I must go."

"Shye, no. You can't run off by yourself. Gage and Pike will be on the hunt for you in a matter of hours." He reached for her hand but she pulled away.

She stared at him with pleading eyes. "I'm

sorry, my love. But *Nagi* calls me. I must become Shadow now."

"But there is no sun yet. How can you find a shadow to borrow? And you can't change at night...remember? You'll be lost in darkness forever. Please...baby...don't go."

"This is different. The Rain Riders have arrived. I am to join them." Even as she spoke the words her voice sounded like someone else's. She'd heard the legend but had never known anyone who'd actually seen them.

"*Rain Riders?*" Extreme concern hung on Trip's voice. "What are they?"

"I-I'm not sure. But I have to go. Something is wrong. I hear the drums of my past calling me."

He stunned her by quickly wrapping strong arms around her and pulling her tight against his chest. "No. I refuse to let you go. This isn't like you." He buried his face in the curve of her neck.

"I'll be back," she said while stroking his hair.

"I'm not letting go. We are so close to ending this nightmare." He cupped her chin with a tender hand and stared into her eyes.

"Gage is coming for me as you said but I won't be here. I don't know why *Nagi* calls me now. Still, I cannot deny her. I cannot deny what I am and neither can you. You knew this before we committed to each other. Please don't try and change me."

Sorrow flooded the depths of his beautiful eyes. "I would never want you to change. I just don't want you to leave. Not tonight... not like this."

"I must. I am sorry." Gently she pushed away from his chest. "Promise you will wait for me."

His expression forced tears to her eyes but she fought them back. He seemed so utterly distraught yet there was nothing she could do to ease his pain. Reaching up, she placed a soft lingering kiss on his lips.

He didn't voice the words but she felt the promise in his kiss. Without looking at him again for fear she'd not be able to answer their call, she turned and walked away.

"Shye, wait!" Trip blocked her at the door, heartache written all over his face.

Their eyes met and locked in an intense exchange. She felt his anxiety, his pain and moreover—his profound love. Knowing she'd never find another love like his, she silently questioned her decision to leave. *Can I deny the ghost dancer without angering the spirit world? This is my gift. I have been chosen to right a wrong.* Her pulse raced. *On the other hand, can I leave this amazing man like this? Can I run off and leave him here to suffer alone?*

Remle approached and laid one hand on Trip's shoulder. "She has been called by a higher force, my friend. She hears them coming."

"What?" Trip sounded horrified.

"Once called upon by the Rain Riders she cannot refuse. Doing so would dishonor her tribe."

"How do you know of them? What are they?"

"Did you forget that I was Chief Blackwater's son? I grew up listening to the stories told by the elders." Remle sighed and lowered his eyes. "The riders are a force summoned to avenge the spirits of those who have left this world. Someone must have desecrated sacred ground for the riders to come."

Shye felt the truth in his words. "My farm. The home of my ancestors. The drug runners must have found our burial ground and dug it up."

"There's a burial ground on your farm?"

"Yes. Remember I mentioned how important it is that my mother and father be laid to rest there?"

"Yes...I do recall you telling me that." He nodded but still seemed distressed. "Then let me go with you."

"You cannot go where she is going," Remle spoke up. "Stay with me and fight off the others when they come."

Trip whipped around to face his friend. "You expect me to simply give her my blessing to ride off with ghosts?"

"If you make her choose, I have no doubt Miss Shye will choose you." Remle cast her a consoling

look. "But if you cage the eagle its spirit will never be the same."

She stared up at Trip as he turned back toward her. "This is who I am. I was Shadow when we met. I cannot change. But he is right. If you force my hand, I would choose you."

A host of mixed expressions flitted through his eyes. "I can't upset the balance of your world. Though I will be lost without you, I won't force you to choose. We pledged ourselves to marry and when you return, I want to make you my wife."

"Even if I must disappear now and then?"

"Yeah...I know we had agreed to wait until I take Draven down, but I don't want to lose you. Since you must go, will you ease my agony by agreeing to marry me after your mission is completed?"

"I'd love to marry you. I'd marry you right now if I could but *Nagi* waits."

Strong yet gentle hands framed her face. His lips drew close to hers. "I will wait for you... *Shadow*. I'll be riding the roads watching for your return. I love you."

"I love you too." She returned his sweet kiss with deep affection. "I'll find you."

Shye stepped outside with some hesitation and closed the door behind her. Just when she thought they had a decent plan to take back what Gage

had stolen, the tables turned. Almost everyone in her community had heard of the Rain Riders, yet nobody had ever seen them. Just like many legends – rumored to exist, but never seen. Still, in her soul she sensed this was the right thing to do. She'd danced with *Nagi* on the highway but had never ridden with spirits. This new calling frightened her somewhat.

However, she'd never been one to bow to fear.

The sky looked rather strange tonight. A peculiar red hue hung in the clouds. Trip had been right about her need to avoid the shadows of night. Chief Blackwater's cautioning words floated through her mind.

*You must release the shadow before the sun sets or you will disappear with it and roam in the land of darkness forever. Be careful. Do not succumb to the lust for power and hold onto the shadows longer than necessary. Complete your task and release them.*

Somehow she sensed that she wouldn't be borrowing any shadows for this task. Walking into a clearing, she gazed up at an oddly colored moon. The smell of rain rode the night breeze yet they hadn't received even a light shower. Unsure of how to proceed she wrapped a hand around each feather dangling from her beaded neckpiece and called upon *Nagi*.

"I am ready for whatever it is you need me to do."

A mild breeze merged into strong gusts of wind. Whispering voices in the trees called her name. *Shadow...Nagi...Shadow...Nagi...* They chanted softly. Drums reminiscent of ages long ago rode the air stream. Before long she saw them coming. She gasped in awe as the riders approached. Humbled by their presence she dropped to her knees.

A herd of black horses with gleaming coats thundered across the Dakota skies carrying warriors of ancient days. Their majestic appearance was breathtaking. She knew by their apparel—the fringed leggings, moccasins, and feathered headdresses that they had all been chiefs of their tribes. Only chiefs wore full bonnets with trains of colorful feathers trailing down their bronze colored backs.

As they drew closer the horses descended from the clouds upon which they galloped and downward to the ground. Hooves ate up the distance with supernatural speed. They tossed their wild manes and snorted their untamed spirits in bursts of fiery breath from flaring nostrils. Enthrallment rushed over her just watching them run.

And to her surprise *Nagi*—the stunning Indian maiden who'd bestowed upon her the gift of shifting into her shadow—fronted the herd. She sat astride a magnificent black steed dressed in her

white doeskin beaded dress and moccasins just as Shye had seen her before.

Awe filled her. *I can't believe it. Nagi is a Rain Rider!*

She could barely contain her excitement. In one hand the lovely maiden carried her dreamcatcher and in the other a long piece of wood. As they came upon her, Shye recognized the branch as a traditional rain stick. She'd seen many throughout the years but the older types were rarely found these days. The rain stick in *Nagi's* hand looked like the real deal—a true cactus branch used in ancient rituals without added fancy décor.

The herd of spirited horses came to a halt before her. *Nagi* nudged her mount forward then made a sweeping motion with her dreamcatcher before drawing it down in front of her, using swirling vertical movements. A stunning white stallion with no rider pranced from behind the pack. He tossed his head and pawed the earth. Shye looked to the maiden who nodded, so she swung herself onto the horse's bare back.

Had she not felt the powerful body beneath her, she'd not have believed any of this was happening. Yet here she sat, on a mystical horse brought in by the original ghost dancer herself. Shye gasped for breath as she settled on its bare back. Many years had passed since she'd ridden a horse, but riding was something one never forgot



once learned. She sat perfectly at ease on this incredible animal as if time had stood still.

She wondered why they'd come for her and where they would go. Yet none of that seemed to matter. The absolute thrill of riding with spirits of the greatest warriors in history overrode any apprehension she had experienced earlier. Her gaze swept over the gathering and she recognized the faces and feathers of great Lakota chiefs from generations past.

With a soft cluck to the horse she nudged the steed up to *Nagi's* side. Her black eyes sparkled yet she said nothing as always—her eyes and hands communicated well. Two ebony braids trailed over her breasts with a black feather tied into one braid and a white feather attached to the other. Shye instinctively placed one hand over her beaded necklace to feel the connection. Her own set of feathers given to her by *Nagi* felt warm to touch.

The icy cold grip that typically accompanied her when she shifted into her shadow did not come, so she knew her body was still very much in human form. Heat from her fiery steed radiated upward to dispel the early morning chill. She twisted her fingers into his long mane and hung on tight as the herd began to move out. *Nagi* led the way. Shye fell in behind and the others followed them. She glanced back once and gasped

at the sight of dozens of warriors galloping through the dark. Within minutes the horses had picked up enough speed to propel them into the air. Upward they climbed until the entire group was racing through the dark skies. The scent of rain flooded her senses yet not a drop fell.

Weightless and free, she'd never experienced anything so thrilling and surreal as they soared across endless skies.

\* \* \* \*

Trip sat unmoving in Remle's living room. Time dragged on as he waited. *For what?* He wondered. *What am I waiting for?* Shye is out there somewhere and Gage will be arriving soon to claim a woman that had disappeared with no credible explanation. He sighed despondently.

"Don't worry." Remle handed him some jerky. "Shye will be okay."

"And what am I supposed to tell Gage when he comes for her?"

"Nothing. If they want a fight then we'll give them a fight."

"Maybe the Rain Riders came to remove Shye from the situation until we handle it," Trip wondered aloud. "I had misgivings about her taking part in a firefight to begin with."

"Perhaps you have made a good point." Remle

gnawed on his jerky with zeal. "There is much wisdom in what you just said. This may be your chance to face off with Draven at last."

"Yeah..." Trip felt a glimmer of hope. *That must be it. Shye's spirit world took her out of Gage's reach and out of danger.* His spirit lifted.

They sat in silence for a long while before rays of morning sun began to break through the darkness. Shortly after sunrise the rumble of a vehicle sounded in the drive.

"They're here." Trip got up and looked out the window. "I see only one vehicle though...a silver SUV."

Remle joined him at the window. "Let's load up just in case this is an ambush."

In the kitchen they gathered their weapons. Trip tucked Shye's favorite shotgun under one arm, slung an AK-47 over his shoulder and grabbed his 9MM pistol. Remle loaded a double barrel shotgun and a rocket launcher. They exchanged knowing grins and prepared to fight.

Someone began pounding loudly on the door then Gage called from the other side. "I've come for Shye. She never returned to town with her decision."

Cautiously Remle opened the door just a crack. "She's not here."

Gage shoved one booted foot inside the door and forced it open. "Like hell she's not here. Her

Shelby Mustang is still parked at her parents' home on the rez, and she's not there either so let me in."

"Where's your crew?" asked Trip with the assault rifle aimed straight at Gage.

"My crew?"

"Don't play dumb. We all know now that you're the ringleader behind this whole mess."

"I came alone. Draven is a chicken shit this morning. He's all freaked out over something that happened last night. Just let me in to see Shye. She's had a week to make up her mind and I won't leave until I see her."

Remle moved around the cabin then returned and nodded. "I don't see anyone else out there."

Trip reached out, grabbed Gage by the collar and yanked him through the door. With a hard shove he pushed him into a nearby chair and pointed the shotgun at him with his other hand. "If you try anything or if your cronies are planning a sneak attack...you're a dead man."

Gage stared up with wide eyes. "What's with all the firepower? I only came for Shye not for war."

"You initiated war when you stole her family's land."

"I've known Shye all of her life. I did her a favor. That huge farm is too much for her now."

"That was her call to make." Trip braced one

foot on the edge of the chair with both guns aimed close at Gage's chest. "Like I said, she's not here."

"But since you went so far out of your way to pay us a visit, you may as well stay a while." Remle quickly tied Gage's hands behind the chair with nylon twine retrieved from a closet.

"You're both insane!" He moved to fight the ties.

"Maybe." Trip laughed sardonically. "But we're not the bad guys."

"But we are the ones holding the weapons," added Remle with a grin. "Now sit still or we'll be forced to knock you out."

Gage's face reddened and his jaw clenched. "You can't hold someone hostage... it's against the law."

"So is running drugs. Have you forgotten that I'm a bounty hunter? Once we flush out your cohorts and they roll over on you, I can collect a hefty bounty for a lawyer on the run. Do you really think anyone is going to come *here* looking for you?" Trip growled. "I would lay money down that you didn't tell a single soul where you were going this morning."

Gage openly seethed and Trip knew he had the man cornered. Now they simply had to keep him under control until they found a way to catch his crew runners in the act. He didn't trust the local officials. No doubt Gage had them all in his

pocket.

This is where his brother had left off. Ty had finally closed in on Draven and was preparing to make the bust the night he got killed. Dirty cops had claimed he'd taken an overdose, but Trip knew that was a lie. Ty died of an overdose as the coroner had stated, but it was no accident. His private investigation backed up his suspicion when he'd discovered that Draven had been the one who murdered his brother.

"You actually did us a favor," Trip said to Gage. "Saved us the trouble of dragging you up here ourselves."

"So where have you hidden Shye? Was this your plan? To use her as bait to accomplish your own means? That makes you no better than us."

"Shye is safely away where nobody from your crew can touch her. And I'd never use Shye. I'm nothing like you."

Remle pulled up a chair, flipped it around and straddled it backward. "So tell us, Gage old boy, when's the next deal going down?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Gage tried to cover his fear with a pretentious laugh. "I only came up here to bring Shye home."

Trip slung the AK-47 over his shoulder, then leaned against the wall with his foot still on the chair and the shotgun resting on a bent knee still pointed at Gage. "*That*—is not going to happen.

But I might forget the bounty if you cooperate.”

Gage didn’t respond but Trip could see his mind working. He’d wait until this man caved no matter how long it took.

Many years had passed without anyone getting this close to Draven’s drug ring since Ty’s investigation, and nobody had ever been able to pin down the ringleaders. Shye had successfully removed Mike Carter from the scene and her unorthodox methods had also inadvertently uncovered Gage’s involvement. With Carter behind bars and the jugular of this murderous group exposed, Trip was no way letting them slip through his fingers or run free on some legal technicality trumped up by Gage.

He realized how critical Shye’s role had been in helping him flush Draven from his hole. Fate had definitely matched him with the right woman. Now for the first time in years he was on the verge of avenging his brother’s death and bringing these criminals to justice.

*I’m closing in, Ty. I won’t back down. I’ll get these pricks this time so you can rest in peace.*

## Chapter Four

Shye scanned the area as the riders descended from the sky and steely hooves pounded the sandy ground. *Where are we?* The first streaks of dawn painted the horizon and barbed wire fencing that spanned a vast area became visible through the morning mist. A huge gray brick building loomed ahead. *A prison? Why have they brought me to a prison in Sioux Falls?*

The riders gathered around her and *Nagi* remained to the front. They waited in the silence of dawn, for what, Shye didn't know. She stroked her horse's neck while letting her gaze peek around the herd. The warriors and their mounts appeared very real, not wraithlike in any way, which astonished her. A sense of awe filled her.

A very tall and strikingly handsome warrior nudged his way through the pack to her side. A long shiny black braid trailed down his bare back. He wore a breastplate made of bone, fringed leggings, and moccasins. His war bonnet bore the



feathers of many colors, indicating his many accomplishments. His ebony eyes met hers. She felt hypnotized while gazing back at him. Streaks of war paint had been slashed across his high cheekbones. His body was pure muscle.

He nodded toward the building then pointed at the gate. "Go," he said in a commanding voice. He pushed his rain stick into her hands. "The *wasicu* committed crimes against your people. You are the one who must avenge the spirit of the land."

She gave the ancient piece a slow once over, awestruck that she actually held something so powerful in her hands. The cactus wood was smooth to touch except where the spines had been pushed inside—those points felt slightly prickly. Heat raced up her arm followed by an icy chill that began at her neck and traveled down her spine. She didn't make a move to disobey. There sat her elders of long ago guiding her. With a soft *cluck*, she signaled her horse forward. The riders hung back as Shye continued toward the prison entrance on her spirited white stallion.

As she neared the gate, her focus honed in on a pickup truck, which she recognized as Pike's. The unpleasant recollection of him forcing her into the truck and taking her to his hideout forced its way into her mind. She assumed the bastard had come to visit Mike Carter, the thieving banker who'd duped her unsuspecting parents into the sale of

their farm. They didn't seem to notice her approach so she rode forward until the truck was a mere few feet away. Pike was sitting in the driver's seat as if waiting for something.

She found it mystifying that the neither the guards nor Pike seemed aware of her presence. She was close enough now to hear every word spoken between them. A few minutes passed before Carter walked into the clearing. Her mouth dropped open in utter shock. *How can this be?* The FBI arrested him for a long list of federal offenses, which should've kept him incarcerated for at least a couple decades. Pike stepped out of the vehicle and met Carter halfway across the yard. She listened closely.

"Thanks for showing up on time," Carter said to Pike. They shook hands. "Gage was supposed to pick me up but he had business out of town."

"Yeah..." Pike muttered with shifty eyes. "He should've left your ass in jail after the trouble you caused. I had another errand to take care of today. You and Gage are slowing me down."

"He and I go back a long way. Besides, I didn't do those robberies and it was my money that launched our business."

"How'd he manage to spring you anyway?"

"Gage is a sharp lawyer. You might do well to keep him on your side just in case you screw up."

"I don't make mistakes," Pike growled. "And I

cover my tracks.”

Carter sneered. “Yeah... see how well you cover them when someone blindsides you then vanishes into thin air.”

“You’re talking about the Indian woman, aren’t you?”

“Yeah... the little trickster found a way to frame me. I didn’t rob my own bank.”

“*Trickster?*” An ominous expression flashed across Pike’s face. “That is what the Native American’s call shifters.”

Shye began to worry that Pike would begin piecing together details. The two men exchanged curious looks and she sensed him honing in on her secret gift.

*I can’t believe that fat little weasel is out of jail and worse, Gage had obviously used some tricks to manipulate the law. Rage welled inside. Her stomach muscles tightened, as did her grip around the rain stick. This is why the riders brought me here.*

Shye’s horse reared up when the two men headed toward the pickup. Instinctively she knew what to do. Carter had owned the land first and initiated the violation against her people. As if she’d slipped back in time, she heard her Lakota ancestors speak to her mind. She’d had been chosen to avenge the wrong, and Carter had been deemed guilty by the riders.

Coldness settled into her soul. With one hand

clutching the stick and the other solidly entwined in the horse's mane, she leaned forward and gave a soft whistle. Immediately the steed bolted across the short distance separating her and Carter. His head shot up as if suddenly aware of her presence and horror filled his beady eyes.

Pike took one look at her, then began running full speed to his pickup. Shye zeroed in on the banker as he tried to run. Before he even got close to the truck, Pike had sped away leaving a cloud of dust in his wake. From the corner of her eye she saw the riders take chase but knew her target was straight ahead.

Raising her rain stick, she swooped down on Carter with ease. He was no match for the powerful mass of muscle and speed carrying her. She clung to the horse's back with her thighs while shifting her weight slightly to the side and making a wide swing with the stick. Instantly upon contact with the rain stick, Carter's body turned to dust. The stallion swung around and Shye gasped at what she saw.

Carter's guilty soul arose from the ashes and reformed into a shadowy form. He stared back at her with hollow eyes. Her horse stopped suddenly and waited as if standing guard. Seconds later another steed—huge and magnificent with a glistening red coat and shining eyes—galloped up from behind her then halted beside the shell of a

man who stood horror-stricken.

She must have blinked because in the next moment the banker's wraithlike soul was astride the sorrel stallion riding on its back behind the Rain Rider. The warrior guiding the impressive horse cried out triumphantly before racing off into the distance. Shye blinked a couple times and gave a light shake of her head. Her heart pounded in her ears from the adrenaline rush. The entire experience had been both exhilarating and mind-blowing.

With a gentle touch, she stroked the horse's neck, then in the next moment, he turned again and his hooves devoured the ground as they raced to catch up with the herd. Her spirit rejoiced. Compelled by a force never before felt she raised the rain stick overhead and released an ecstatic whoop. She didn't understand the new feelings deluging her soul, but didn't care to analyze them. With the help of the Rain Riders she'd just taken out enemy number one.

\* \* \* \*

Pike had the pedal stomped to the floor. His truck pitched and bounced over the rocky terrain. In his panic he had driven off the main road into some desert land with the herd of horses closing in from behind. He knew they wanted his soul just as

they'd taken Aiden's, and now probably Carter's. His mind was reeling over Shye's appearance with the riders. *What the hell is she?* He had known since their first encounter that something supernatural surrounded her but never imagined this. *Is she real? A ghost?*

Glancing in his rearview mirror he noticed that the cloud of dust chasing him had begun to settle. He focused to his front and saw the highway coming back into view. Pushing his pickup for all its worth he hit solid pavement at last after lurching over a small knoll then landing with a loud crunch. The truck teetered and fishtailed while bobbing up and down. He hoped the drive train and frame remained intact long enough to get him back into town. Had he expected to be running for his life he'd have taken one of his better vehicles to retrieve Carter.

*What a waste of time, he fumed. Drove all the way out there only to lose the prick to a herd of ghost horses and almost lost my life in the process. I should've been taking the damn rain stick to auction.* He barreled down the interstate as fast as his truck would go, less worried about a speeding ticket than the things chasing him. Another look behind and he realized he'd outrun the riders, or perhaps they'd been satisfied with one soul for now. He'd managed another escape from these ghostly beings that had sprung from nowhere. *They must*

*be after the relic.*

He wondered if returning the rain stick to the site would make a difference at this point or if it was too late. *Will the riders keep on coming now that they'd been unearthed? If so, how can they be stopped? Are they looking for the relic or are they hunting the man who'd dug it up?* Nothing had ever rattled him like this. Dealing with criminals and cops was all the same—everyone had their price. But this—nothing had ever struck fear into him until now.

His truck came to a screeching halt in front of Gage's office, sending a cloud of dust into the air. He leapt out and blew through the door. La was sitting at her desk polishing her fingernails.

"Where the hell is Gage?"

"Well hello to you too." She looked up with a half frown, seemingly undisturbed by his frantic entrance.

"He should be back by now. Where is he?"

La shrugged. "I don't know. Said he had business out of town and left me here to take calls. What's with you? Looks like you've seen a ghost." She rubbernecked behind him. "Where's Carter? Weren't you supposed to pick him up?"

"Something went wrong. Carter is... gone."

"Gone?" La tucked a few strands of bleach blonde hair behind one ear and cocked her head. "As in... dead?"

Pike gave a short nod. "We encountered

something out there like I've never seen."

"Where's the body? Aren't you worried the law will pin his death on you?"

"There's no body. He's just... gone... Rain Riders," he muttered in disbelief.

"Are you on drugs?"

"Just get Gage on the phone, will ya?" He growled.

"Fine." She gingerly picked up the receiver and in painfully slow motion pecked out the number on her keypad. "It's ringing." She sighed and drummed the fingers of one hand on her desk. "I got his voicemail. Do you want me to leave a message?"

"No."

La hung up the phone. "I'm sure he'll be back soon. He's been gone all morning."

"Yeah... I'm headed out to the farm. Tell him to find me when he gets back."

She nodded and lifted quizzical brows but said no more.

Pike dismissed her blasé attitude and stomped out of the office. But before leaving the porch he did a quick back and forth look around town. The riders had set him on edge. After hastily walking to his truck then hopping in, he keyed the engine and headed out of town. Every couple of minutes he checked his mirrors for anything suspicious approaching from behind.



## Chapter Five

“Crazy weather out there,” Remle muttered while staring out the window. “Looks like something nasty moving in.”

Gage fidgeted in the hardwood chair. “How long do you think you can hold me here before someone notices I’m missing?”

Trip laughed. “Seems they’d have come by now if they cared. Face it, you’ve been hung out to dry.”

“My phone was ringing...someone is looking for me.”

“Not very hard.” Trip held up the cell phone. “They didn’t even leave a message.”

“What do I have to do to get out of here?” Gage’s forehead beaded with sweat.

“Give us the information we need and return the farm to Shye. Then we might consider letting you walk out of here after the deal goes down.” Trip gave him a hard stare and spoke with brutal determination. “I finally have Draven in my

crosshairs. I'm not backing down."

"I can't do all that from here! The deed is locked in my office."

Trip flipped open the cell phone. "Make a call. Have your secretary fax the necessary papers. Don't even think about dropping a clue that anything is out of order."

"Then what?" Anger mixed with fear hung on his voice.

"You'll sign the farm back over to Shye and give us the time and location of the next big drop. The longer it takes me to track Draven, the longer you'll be our guest."

"Do you realize what you're asking me to do? Those men are stone-cold-killers. If they get wind that I've rolled over on them, I'll be next on their list."

"Like my brother?" Trip felt his muscles twitch and his finger tighten on the trigger.

"Look, I'm sorry about Ty, but I had nothing to do with that. Pike does what he wants without asking permission. I had no idea he killed your brother until Carter hired him to go after Shye."

"Why don't I believe you? You've been part of this circle all along."

"The drug part, yeah. I didn't know there would be killing. I didn't even know who *you* were until Shye returned home. She refused to back down so Carter called Pike in to catch her."

"What the hell did you expect when you hooked up with this group?"

"Easy money." Gage shrugged then sighed. "But then you rolled into town and somehow managed to hook up with Shye. That's when I heard the talk about Pike giving your brother an overdose. By then it was too late for me to get out." He looked up with narrowed eyes and tight lips. "You don't simply walk away from these guys."

"You'll have to overlook my lack of sympathy." Trip shoved the phone close to his face. "Make the call."

"Hard to dial with my hands tied," came Gage's snide remark.

Remle poked his back with the double barrel shotgun. "Don't be an ass. Give us the number then be smart and tell your secretary what to do. Remember, no tricks or you'll soon take lessons behind different kinds of *bars*."

He stammered out the number to his office and watched as Trip keyed them into the unit then placed the phone on speaker.

"Gage Korben, Attorney at Law," a woman answered.

"La, I need you to fax me some documents," Gage told her.

"Gage, where are you? Pike was in here acting strangely. He's looking for you and he didn't

bring Carter back."

Trip saw Gage flinch as if he wanted to tell La to shut up, so he gave him a sharp warning nod.

Sweat trickled down Gage's temples as he continued. "Did something go wrong?"

"He said Carter is dead but he seemed really out of it. I think he was high. He muttered *rain riders* or something."

Gage's face paled yet he kept his cool. "He's just edgy over a recent discovery on the farm. Don't worry about it. Go into the vault and fax me a copy of the title insurance for the farm and a sale contract."

"Don't tell me this thing is changing hands again." La openly sighed into the receiver.

"Afraid so. Now that Carter is out of jail he wants it back and I really don't have time to keep up with his insanity."

"I just told you that Carter is dead. Weren't you listening?"

Gage took a deep breath. "Who are you going to believe? Me or Pike? The man is crazier than Carter. Just do what I said okay? I want to take care of business so I can finish up for the day."

"Ohhh... so that's why you went out of town on business and sent Pike on a wild goose chase," she chirped. "You didn't want Pike to know about the switchback."

Gage faked a laugh. "You catch on quickly, La.

Would you be a doll and fax the proper paperwork so I can be done with this thing once and for all?"

"Of course. Give me a fax number."

Trip held a piece of paper up to his face with the number scribbled on it. Gage repeated the numbers with impressive calm in his voice.

"Got it," La said. "I'll send these right away."

"Thanks, you're a sweetheart. See you soon."

"Okay...muah!" she returned then ended the call.

"How sweet...she even sent you a kiss. Got something going on with the secretary?" Trip smirked. "That wasn't so hard now was it? I'm impressed with how naturally lying comes to you... trick of the trade?"

Gage scowled in silence.

Remle walked over to his desk and waited for the fax. A few minutes later the printer kicked in and papers began coming through.

Trip untied Gage but kept a gun to his back.

"For an old hillbilly you have a pretty modern setup here." Gage wrinkled his brow. "I'm almost glad to be rid of the damned place after all this," Gage grumbled while signing the documents. "This farm has been nothing but a pain in the ass."

Trip took the documents and looked them over, then filled in Shye's name where required while Remle tied Gage back to the chair. Once

everything looked in order he handed them to Remle who locked them in a fire-safe.

"Shye will be ecstatic when she returns," Trip said with a satisfied grin. "Now just one more chore for you and we'll try to forget your involvement."

"By the way," Remle added. "I heard your secretary mention the Rain Riders. Certainly you've heard of them." He shot Gage an expectant look.

An uneasy expression shadowed Gage's face. "Yeah...another reason I'm not overly distressed about giving the land back to Shye...Pike and his damned rain stick."

"Rain stick?" Remle's brows shot up.

"Yeah...he and his crew found it on the farm, but I wouldn't have any part of it."

"I can't believe you got that slime bag banker out of jail. Do you have any ethics at all?" Trip shook his head in disdain.

"He was actually innocent this time and you know it. We all know who was robbing the bank, but nobody knows how she framed Carter. He isn't too bright but nobody is stupid enough to rob their own bank then launch a grenade into it in broad daylight."

"I have no idea who you're referring to." Trip turned away to hide a smug grin.

"Yeah right and like you didn't love being her

getaway driver after she pulled the jobs. That woman belongs to me and once she sees I've signed her land back over, I'll be the hero. Shye will finally realize how much I love her. She'll forgive my previous involvement and thank me for undoing Carter's dirty work."

"If that's what you need to tell yourself to get this done then so be it." Trip kept his back toward him.

"Shye will completely believe me when I tell her everything I did was because of Pike and Carter. Hell, you did me a favor, biker boy. Keeping me here while who knows what happened to Carter. And Pike ran off like a scared animal...not only do I have a solid alibi but I look more like a victim than the criminal. I'd shake your hand but..." Gage let out a mocking laugh. "They're tied up at the moment."

Heat washed over Trip as his hatred for this man escalated. *What will Shye think when she returns to find a man she's known most of her life tied up and held prisoner?* He recalled how shocked she'd been over Gage's involvement as if she hadn't wanted to believe he could do something this low especially to her. He knew how badly she wanted to believe that Gage had been forced into the drug ring.

Betrayal was a hard thing to accept. Denial came much easier.

"You still have to give up the day and time of the next drop," Trip said without turning around.

"I've just sold their base of operations and put my ass in their line of fire. I may as well go all the way if it means getting Shye back. You may get your man, Trip Viper—but I just took your woman."

*Damn him!* Trip stalked to the opposite side of the cabin and stared out the window. Gage was smart—he had to give him that. How fast his mind worked had come as a surprise especially under pressure. *Fast-talking dirty lawyer!* No wonder he'd been able to clear Carter of the many charges against him. And now he was going to paint a false façade to Shye in an attempt to discredit his character. The man was a shrewd attorney through and through even in his personal life. *How will she know who's telling the truth when I refuse to set Gage free until after we make the bust?*

Worry cluttered his mind.

*I managed to get her farm back. But will she believe it was me or will she credit her old friend, thinking he finally escaped the bad guys?*

He couldn't risk a setup by releasing Gage before he caught Draven. He was so close to avenging Ty's death that he couldn't let go. Losing Shye over this would send him into seclusion, and as much as he loved her, he'd made a vow on his brother's grave that he couldn't break. He knew



she wouldn't want to marry a man who carried no honor. He prayed she would trust the right man and not be deceived again.

His heart ached for her.

Pinned between a promise made years ago to bring a killer to justice and a vow he'd recently made to the truest woman he'd ever known—his internal struggle ensued. *Will Shye accept my reasons for holding Gage captive or will she believe his lies?*

All of a sudden the door blew open as a fierce storm descended upon them. Rain bands drenched Trip before he pushed the door shut. Then he heard a light tapping outside.

"Trip...it's me."

His heart leapt at her voice and he flung open the door. "Shye!" Immediately he swept her into his arms and kissed her face then her lips. "I missed you, angel."

She offered a warm smile then her gaze shot to Gage tied to the chair. "What's going on?"

"He showed up here looking for you. We had no choice but to make him stay."

"Tell her!" Gage shouted. "Or I will!"

Shye backed away. "Tell me what?"

## Chapter Six

“I wanted to give you time to settle in.” Trip shot Gage a look of utter rage. “We got your farm back.”

“You did?” Shye gasped with wide eyes. A mix of excitement and apprehension washed over her. “How? When?”

“I did it, darling,” Gage piped up. “The papers are over there.” He nodded toward Remle’s desk.

“You? What’s really going on here?”

“Your lover boy won’t release me until he gets his revenge.” Gage stared straight at her. “I came here to find you, return the land and apologize for my behavior of late. They dragged me through the door and tied me up before I had a chance to state my case.”

Trip spun around. His eyes blazed with fury. “Shut the hell up! She doesn’t need more lies.” He grabbed Gage by the throat, lowered his head and growled through clenched teeth in a low menacing voice. “If I didn’t need your ass to lead

the way, I'd drop you right here."

Shye shook her head to clear her mind. "What?" She'd never seen this level of rage in him. She placed a gentle hand on his arm. "Trip... please let him finish."

His eyes met hers briefly but in that momentary glance she saw the swirl of turmoil smoldering in their depths. Had she not known his gentle side this burst of outrage would've unsettled her.

He removed his hands and stepped back at her request but every muscle in his body was still tense with visible anger.

"Show her the papers," Gage barked while rubbing his neck. "I signed the farm over to you, honey. There's a copy of the title insurance and the contract is signed by me. The original title search is safely in my office should you ever need it."

Remle handed her the papers. She flipped through each page. Tears misted her eyes as she saw for herself Gage's signature on each page and her name as the buyer.

"But I haven't paid you...I don't have enough money saved for this yet."

"Don't worry about it. You can reimburse me when you are able. Carter was killed this morning at the prison so I am free now. Free of his sniveling, blackmailing ways and free of his cronies."

She didn't blink. "What about all that talk over the farm being too much for me to run alone?"

Gage sighed with a yielding expression. "I had a change of heart when I saw how hurt you were during our last visit. I was under a lot of pressure. I'm so sorry, darling. Can you ever forgive me?" He paused contemplatively. "In fact, consider the farm my gift to you. Your parents can keep the money and you don't owe me a thing. It's the least I can do to make up for what I put you through. Will you accept it as my token of peace and perhaps even an act of goodwill to regain the favor of your dear parents."

She caught Trip rolling his eyes but he respected her request and didn't interrupt.

"I'm overwhelmed." She looked from one man to another. "Is this for real?" Her gaze stopped on Trip.

"Yes," he replied. "The farm is yours again, babe... free and clear."

"Then why is Gage still tied up?" she asked in a soft voice.

Trip took her hand in his. "I could tell you that we forced Gage to sign the land over to you and that La faxed the papers here while you were gone. But I doubt I could win a battle of words with this man."

"Is that what happened? Or is Gage telling the truth? Did he come here to make amends?"

"Yes, that's how it went down and no, he didn't come here with good intentions. We did drag him in and tie him to the chair. He wasn't a willing participant, but I won't defend my actions," Trip told her. "He'll only twist them around. You'll have to search your heart and believe what you feel is right."

Knowing what had happened to Carter, she wanted to believe Gage's profession. All along she'd wanted to believe he had fallen into the wrong crowd and had been forced to cooperate. Now that Carter was indeed gone and Gage had signed her farm over, she couldn't help but wonder if everything he said was the truth. *And if so, why is Trip holding him hostage?* There didn't appear to be a threat to her wellbeing and the blackmail ploy of marriage was clearly off the table.

Still, Trip hadn't gone overboard in self-defense, which made him appear more confident in his words. Yet Gage's timing was perfect. Only he or someone close to him could've known about Carter's demise, which would indeed lend credit to his account.

"Seems your boyfriend is so hell bent on avenging his brother's death that he's willing to hold an innocent man prisoner until he gets his man," Gage added.

"Trip?" She stared at him with questioning

eyes. "Why *are* you keeping him here now that he's no longer involved?"

"I am this close—" He pressed his thumb and index finger almost together, leaving a small space between them. "To bringing in Ty's killer. I can't risk Draven getting away through a legal loophole created by his attorney friend here. And... we can't be sure Gage will give us accurate details on the next big deal. If he's free he'll lie and they'll disappear again especially since the farm will no longer be available to them. We have to make him lead us to Draven and his crew."

"See, Shye?" Gage wriggled in the chair. "Trip's top priority is going after Draven instead of placing your needs first. I got your farm out from under Carter and as soon as the way was clear gave it back to you. But Viper isn't happy with that. He won't be happy until Pike is dead."

Shye raised her hand in a motion for him to stop. "Please...let me think. I am very grateful to you, Gage, for what you have done, but I need to make up my own mind about Trip."

"Well you've known me almost all of your life, darling. He road into town for one thing and is just using you along the way."

"Gage!" Shye waved him off and walked into the kitchen area.

"You lying prick," Trip growled barely loud enough for her to hear.

This was not the reunion she'd expected upon her return. Traveling with the Rain Riders had been incredible—gripping—liberating. She hadn't wanted the experience to end. Never did she expect to find Gage bound to a chair when she walked through the door. She'd longed to share her thrilling encounter with her fiancé. Though he hadn't yet presented an engagement ring, she assumed his proposal had been sincere.

Now she had her land back! She could move her parents back home without delay. Would Trip honor his words and move onto the plantation with her? Was he sincere when he'd agreed to make her home his too? Or would he take off again in pursuit of Pike and leave her behind?

She wanted to believe both men—that Trip loved her as he said and Gage was innocent like she'd hoped. *Why can't they work together to capture Pike? If Gage is innocent then wouldn't he want the men who'd been forcing his hand put behind bars? And is it possible that avenging his brother's death is more important to Trip than a life with me? What if he doesn't catch Pike this time? What if the evil man slips away? Will Trip follow him around forever? When will this nightmare end?*

"Hey..." Trip spoke softly upon his almost silent approach. "Are you okay, my love?"

She turned slowly. "Am I *your* love, Trip? Or do I come second to your thirst for revenge?"

"If you have to ask me that then maybe we aren't meant to be as I thought."

"You'd give up just like that?" Tears formed but she fought them back.

"I won't defend myself against that bastard. Every word I said, though significantly less in number than his, was the truth. I'd never lie to you. If you can't trust me then we have nothing."

His blunt statement hit hard. He was a man of strong conviction. She loved that about him.

"Then release him. End this and go after Pike on your own."

Trip shook his head. "I explained why I cannot do that. Please trust me and accept my methods. I stood by you from day one without asking you to go against your gut instinct. If we are to be married, then I'd hope you could do the same for me."

"But I wasn't holding an innocent man hostage at gunpoint."

"No..." He gave a light laugh. "You were only robbing and blowing up banks and using me as your getaway driver."

She shrugged her brows and grinned. "Touché."

"Then you accept my way of handling this matter?" Hope shone in his alluring dark eyes. "That is not an innocent man in there. Do you trust me?"



"I do..."

"But?"

"I can't be a part of it...I'm sorry." She placed one hand alongside his face. "I understand, but I don't feel right taking action against Gage when he just signed over the farm."

A frustrated look swept over Trip's face. "He wasn't exactly willing."

"Then tell me...how did he sign all those papers with his hands tied behind his back if he didn't arrive with them already signed?"

He shrugged and nodded in open understanding. "I can see how that seems impossible. He is outnumbered. We held him at gunpoint then tied him back up."

"This is a lot to digest, baby," she said with pointed brows. "I just can't see him doing all that against his will."

"He said he was almost glad to get rid of the place."

"Now that does not sound like Gage. I'm not comfortable with this situation. However, I do respect your need to handle it your way."

His arms slid around her waist and pulled her close. "I don't want to lose you."

"You won't." She laid her head on his shoulder and breathed in his scent. "I wanted so much to tell you about my experience, but it will have to wait."

"I'm sorry, babe." He nuzzled her neck. "Please stay with me. I need you."

Her lips touched his, lightly at first then hungrily as they sunk into a heady kiss laden with passion. He swept her into a powerful embrace while kissing her with hot desire. Her body ached to join with him—to stay. Yet she couldn't take part in a kidnapping. Trip had been riding on the edge of the law for so long that she worried he may have lost sight of the line between justice and revenge.

"Forgive me," she whispered in the few seconds their lips were free. "I must go."

He reluctantly let her ease from his arms. Tears welled in her eyes over the hurt she saw in his. Her spirit tumbled as she turned and walked out the back door.

Crouching near a stream deep in the woods behind Remle's cabin, Shye waited. Her stomach growled with hunger as the sun climbed to its highest point of the day then began inching downward in a clear blue South Dakota sky. She'd been in prayer all morning after leaving Trip with that heartbroken look in his soulful eyes. She missed him already. As she arose from prayer, a majestic bald eagle soared overhead then dipped lower until its shadow settled over her.

*Thank you, Wakatanka.* She stood with shoulders

pulled back while clutching the black feather. *I am ready, Nagi.*

Instantly feathers replaced her arms and fingers. Her feet shifted into awesome talons that looked powerful and sharp. The icy chill of assuming the shadow of another creature and shifting into its form settled over her. She then knew that the transformation was complete. When in the shadows her body felt cold and she could merge through any solid surface while in her shifted form. She'd grown accustomed to the bone-chilling sensation though each time a feeling of awe fell upon her—astounded by the gift her ancestors had given her.

Up, up she floated on the summer breeze until buildings looked like dots and people were specks to her keen eagle eyes. This was where she found peace and the best place to think. While she didn't fault Trip for his tactical methods, as they both had strong military backgrounds, she simply couldn't play a part. If Gage was even slightly remorseful, as he'd said, then she felt compelled to back away until the situation sorted itself.

Her faith was based on honor. She couldn't disobey that.

While gliding effortlessly on massive wings she kept watch for something to satisfy her hunger. She enjoyed the glorious feeling of freedom while soaring on a strong wind current. Below a river

sparkled beneath the sun and she caught sight of a huge fish hovering near the surface of the crystal clear water.

After releasing a piercing call, she swooped rapidly down and snatched the fish straight from the water with her talons. Carrying her prey to a nearby cliff, she laid it down and proceeded to eat. The fish tasted fresh and clean and stilled the grumbling in her stomach. Once her meal was finished she spread her beautiful feathered wings to soar upward again.

She hadn't been flying very long this time when something in the distance caught her side vision.

*The Rain Riders!*

Flapping her wings, she followed, wondering why they'd returned. The wrong had been righted and the stolen land that had belonged to her family for generations was now in the proper hands. *Who have the riders come for?* Her focus honed in on a couple of people riding north on the highway far below. Dipping lower, she recognized Trip and Remle on motorcycles with Gage riding bitch.

*Oh no! The deal must be going down tonight and they are taking Gage along as insurance.* Panic deluged her. She drifted lower, but took care to remain behind the Rain Riders as they thundered across the sky. A glance at the sun indicated she had only a few hours of daylight left before she'd

be forced to shift back or remain forever in darkness. Flying alongside the riders thrilled and terrified her in the same light.

*What if they mistake Trip for one of the drug dealers? Or worse, what if they've deemed Trip guilty of a crime against Gage since he returned the farm?* Her heart beat faster. She could do nothing but watch and hope that the man she loved hadn't made a fatal mistake.

The three men below looked up. She could tell by their horror-stricken expressions that they'd spotted the riders. Trip swerved as the herd of approaching horses made contact with the road. He laid his Harley down and skidded at least fifty feet before coming to a stop. Gage had been on back with him and rolled off the seat a short distance away. Both men appeared shocked into disbelief.

Remle on the other hand pulled his bike to a stop before colliding with them and jumped off to watch. She knew that as Chief Blackwater's adopted son, Remle had nothing to fear and he most likely was more awed than anything. Yet she couldn't help but wonder if Remle feared for his longtime friend as she did now.

Gage sprung to his feet and took off running down a steep embankment. She didn't understand why he'd be afraid. He grew up hearing the stories. *Surely he knows that the riders only take those*

*who have committed a crime against their ancestors.* His remorse and return of the land had indeed been a step in the right direction. Then her gaze shifted to Trip who walked to the middle of the road and stood with his shoulders squared and head lifted with impressive dignity.

*What is he doing?* She swooped lower, wanting so badly to help him, yet knowing she was forbidden to interfere. Her heart sank as the riders moved in swinging their rain sticks with loud cries of war filling the air. In the midst of utter chaos Trip stood strong and proud like warriors of old. A sense of pride flooded her even in her fear. She'd never seen a more strikingly handsome man who exhibited the courage of a bear.

*Please...don't take Trip!*

They descended upon Trip in all their fury then in the blink of an eye switched directions and headed over the hillside. Gage's screams of terror rose and reverberated off the rocky caverns. Shye flew closer and watched in shock as the rider on the red-coated horse swung his stick at Gage. One final scream and Gage turned to dust, then she saw his shadowy form riding on back of the sorrel horse.

*Oh my god!* She couldn't gasp in eagle form but felt a rush of wind hit her full force as the Rain Riders blew past her. Gage's hollow eyes met hers for an instant before he was taken away. She

doubted she'd ever forget the look of sheer dread in those haunting depths. *Gage...Gage is guilty! How?* Soaring on spread wings she circled above while keeping a trained eye on the two men below. Remle rode off in the direction of his cabin but Trip headed off toward town.

*Is he going after Pike or in search of me?*

She followed.

## Chapter Seven

Trip was riding at a high rate of speed so she used the power of her wings to keep up. *I love being an eagle...so much power and freedom!* The image of the riders taking Gage hung in her mind. Her lover had been right, yet she'd played it safe this time. A twinge of regret for doubting him gnawed at her but she kicked it aside. Every instinct must be followed, this she knew. And for reasons that eluded her, she'd chosen to remove herself from the situation.

While following Trip, she offered a prayer of thanks to the spirit world for sparing his soul and she asked them to cover him with their protection. He had gone about halfway to town and just passed the reservation when another biker came into view. He had pulled out from the wood line and headed the same direction as Trip. She didn't recognize the bike so she dipped lower for a closer look. A brawny man wearing a baseball cap and leather jacket was driving a fairly large



motorcycle. A long black ponytail hung down his back but she still couldn't see his face.

He was moving in behind Trip. *Must be a passerby*, she thought, yet she kept watch for some reason. He lifted one arm and continued steering the bike with one hand. Another swoop around brought his face into better view as well as the object in his raised arm. Panic engulfed her so much so that she almost fell to the ground in shock.

Pike Draven was racing up behind Trip in a sneak attack with an assault rifle in his hand. And Trip clearly didn't recognize him, as the man had done a decent job of disguising himself.

*No! No! No!* With not a single minute to spare as the gap was quickly closing and placing Trip within range of fire—she did the only thing that came to mind—dove! A shot went out and clipped her wing, sending her tumbling downward. Pike must have seen her coming and tried to shoot her down. Searing pain raced along the muscles of her wing. She did her best to stay on course. Jutting her talons out in front she held her broken wing up the best she could and used the wind to carry her down.

He fired again but missed seconds before her claws clutched his face. He cursed loudly and omitted a painful cry then lost control of the bike. She cast a glance at Trip to see if he'd been hit.

Much to her relief he had remained unscathed but had obviously heard the shots and was now aware of the commotion behind him. He swung his Harley around and barreled toward them. She flopped to the side of the road, leaving Pike with his motorcycle.

Shye thought for certain that Trip would go after Pike then come back for her but he didn't. He raced to her side, parked his bike then leapt off.

"Shye!" He slid to the ground on his knees and scooped her into strong arms.

With her safely cradled on his lap, he reached into his holster and pulled out his nine-millimeter pistol then took aim at Pike who'd begun to scramble to his feet. Trip fired one round after another and hit him twice before the bastard got away.

He laid his gun aside and held her, gently stroking her feathery head. His touch warmed her even in the shadows. She was still somewhat dazed from the incident and pain from her wounded wing.

"You must shift," he said. "The sun is almost gone." Taking hold of the white feather dangling at her neck, he called upon *Nagi* on her behalf.

Hearing his sensual, softly masculine voice call upon the spirit world stirred her deep inside. A wave of heat washed over her followed by a dull ache in her stricken arm as she shifted from the

world of shadows back to humanity. Immediately Trip tore a strip of fabric from his t-shirt and made a temporary bandage for her wound. He kissed the sore spot with tender lips as her body completed the shift. Warmth returned. Her eyes fluttered open.

"You saved my life..." His voice faltered with emotion.

"You stayed with me instead of taking the opportunity to go after Pike."

His liquid gaze poured over her. "Of course, my love."

"You might lose his trail again," she murmured, feeling a little weak.

"I'd rather lose him than lose you, angel. You are everything to me." His breath feathered her lips sending delightful shivers over her skin. "I can't believe you took him on. You are the bravest woman I've ever known."

"I saw everything. I'm sorry I doubted your instinct and left you at the cabin."

With a gentle hand under her chin, he said, "Don't be. Had you not followed *your* instinct I'd be with your ancestors right now. Nobody saw that coming. I have no idea how he knew where to find us."

"Gage was lying as you said, but I still don't understand why the riders took him after he returned my land."

Trip arched his brows. "I'd never question a force like them... wow... that was mind-blowing."

"Yeah... they are awesome, aren't they?" She smiled then winced. "And you... you stood there like a brave warrior prepared to accept your fate. I have never been more proud of you."

"Hey... everything I do comes from the heart. I figured if they were coming for me then there was no use running like a coward."

"My brave warrior... I love you so much."

The easy smile she loved swept his gorgeous face and he pushed to his feet with her in his arms. "C'mon, let's get you up to Remle's and tend that arm." He carried her to his bike and gently positioned her onto the passenger seat. She wrapped one arm around his muscled waist as he steered the bike onto the road. Within minutes they were cruising north at a comfortable speed toward Remle's cabin.

"What the hell happened?" Remle rushed them inside before closing the door.

"Draven ambushed me," Trip said. Rage and emotion flooded his voice. "Shye saw him coming and she dropped out of the sky — literally — to save me. He fired off a couple shots and clipped her wing."

Remle promptly removed the makeshift bandage. He slid eyeglasses on and peered

through the lenses while inspecting the damage. "Doesn't look too serious. The bullet passed straight through. I can fix you up unless you'd rather see an MD in town."

"No...no doctors. I've been hurt worse than this. Just fix it."

She sat still with the ball of fabric pressed against her arm as he left the room then returned moments later with a first aid kit.

"I take it you've done this before."

His blue eyes twinkled. "I don't go into town much, just to buy supplies. I like my privacy. I learned a lot from the medic in the Marines." After pouring rubbing alcohol into the wound he looked at her again. "That had to hurt like hell yet you made no sound."

"I hated being a girl when I was little. I used to secretly follow the young men to watch their warrior training. *Ate* knew I was there but he never said anything. He once told me that I had the heart of a warrior. When *Ina* raised a fuss over me joining the military, *Ate* calmed her fears and assured her that I would be okay."

"He was right." Remle bandaged her arm, packed his medical supplies away and stood up. "You'll be good as gold in no time."

Trip stepped forward then knelt beside the sofa. "She already is." He rested his forehead on her bare midriff and drew a heavy breath. "Thank

God you're okay."

Shye stroked his silky hair as his arms slid around her waist. She basked in his deeply affectionate embrace. His humble position at her side touched her heart. She kissed the top of his head and continued petting the luxurious black strands that fell around his face.

"I found this on my desk when I returned." Remle laid a cell phone on the arm of the couch. "Gage must've wriggled his way over and managed to send a quick text while you and Shye were in the kitchen. I had stepped out for a few minutes to relieve myself. He was one determined prick."

Trip lifted his head. Taking the unit in hand, he flipped it open and read a text message from the phone that Gage had sent to Pike. *"Heading north to Cooper's Lake. Viper and Dax with me. Clear out. Farm is gone."*

"That's why the Rain Riders took him." Shye gasped, astounded by his level of deception. "I was so wrong about him all the way around. How could I be so naïve? He almost convinced me that he'd done a noble deed when all along he was setting you up."

"There's nothing naïve about wanting to think the best of someone you've known all your life," Trip told her with soft eyes. "Don't ever lose that heart of gold."

"He wasn't bullied into participating as I thought." She sighed. "Sometime while I was away the man I used to know turned into a hardened criminal. He really did mastermind the hijacking of my parents' land. At least now I understand why he sprung Carter from prison. I wonder... who is the boss in that crew?"

"Probably none of them, men of that nature are always watching their backs even against each other. There's no trust among thieves and killers. Gage was still going to take me out even with Carter gone." Trip gave her a curious look. "You never flinched when he said Carter had been killed at the prison. I thought for sure you would've had some kind of reaction. How do you know Gage got Carter out?"

"I never got a chance to tell you about my ride. The Rain Riders escorted me to the prison. I was confused at first as to why they'd taken me there. Then I saw Pike waiting in his truck and Carter came out. I could hear them talking about Gage springing him."

"That's exactly why I didn't want to turn him loose. He was a snake of a lawyer and I knew he'd find a way to help Draven slip through the noose."

"Gage certainly had a way with words. Guess he was in the right profession just on the wrong side." She lifted one corner of her mouth in a half frown. "And he lied to the very end. The riders

took me there to kill Mike Carter. I watched his soul ride off with them just as Gage's did."

"Wow..." Trip gazed at her with sheer awe in his eyes.

"Yeah..." Remle added. "I am honored to be in your presence."

"Stop that," she said with a light laugh. "I'm no better than anyone else. I just happened to be blessed with the privilege of riding with the greatest warriors of all time." She then proceeded to tell them every detail of her experience with the riders.

They sat in open wonder, clearly fascinated by her story. When she'd finished, Trip appeared awestruck. He shifted his weight from the floor to sit beside her on the sofa, gazing down at her with those captivating eyes that made her tingle all over.

Remle stared down while rubbing his chin in open contemplation. "I wonder why the riders didn't take Pike out there on the road. His guilt is undeniable."

"That's a good question." She wondered about this. *Why hadn't they delivered their vengeance to Pike? The man is guilty as sin.*

"Maybe..." Trip arched one brow. "They're saving him for me."

\* \* \* \*



"How's your arm?" Trip asked as he led Shye outside to the front lawn of Remle's cabin.

"I'm fine." Her black eyes shimmered in the moonlight as she looked up with a warm smile.

"I can't believe everything that's happened." He gave a slow shake of his head as they neared his parked Harley. "You have your land back. I couldn't be happier for you. I bet you can't wait to tell your parents."

"Everything seems so surreal." Her voice was soft, almost dreamy-like. She ran one dainty hand over his chest. "I am very excited about giving *Ina* and *Ate* the good news. I will move them back home tomorrow. But tonight I want to enjoy you."

He straddled the seat then helped her on to his front. She cast him a wicked grin as he eased her into position facing him with her long, killer legs draped over his thighs. He laid her backward with one hand supporting the small of her back. She threw her head back and with one hand swept that gorgeous mane of black off her lovely face in a gesture so laden with utter sensuality he nearly lost it right there. She clutched his forearm with her other hand while leaving the other arm up over her head in a *take-me-now* invitation.

Her breasts barely covered by her black halter-style half top, rose and fell to her soft breathing as she lay before him with gently closed eyes and

sweetly glossed lips. Her raven hair shone in the moonlight as it draped behind her. He wanted her here—now—under the moonlight on his bike. And he knew without a doubt she wanted the same by her suggestive body language. An urgent ache rose in his groin creating a painful tightening in his jeans that throbbed for relief.

“You’re stunning,” he purred. Lowering his head, he let his lips trail along her bare midriff.

She moaned softly. “Take me, Trip...take me right here just like this. I’ve missed you so much.”

“I missed you too, babe.”

A few minutes later after a few smooth moves and some perfectly synchronized body movements they were both naked and in the same stimulating position, nestled against each other skin-on-skin. She cried out as he pushed inside while at the same time gripping her hips and pulling them tight against his. He ran both hands down the length of her legs then back up and along her waist while making love to her.

She tangled her fingers in his hair and took a tight hold when his mouth found her breasts. He lingered at her bosom, kissing and savoring her beauty, making her writhe in heated passion. She pushed against him, openly pleading for more. He didn’t hold back. Using his hands and lips, he bathed every inch of her delicate luscious body with passion.

His gaze moved over her as he pushed deep. Never had he seen a more beautiful woman—laid out before him on his Harley in the most provocative pose a man could fathom. The way she clung to him as they joined took him higher until the heat became too much to hold back. He groaned long and slow as his release filled her. She tensed and sucked in a sharp breath seconds before her own climax seized her.

“I love you, angel,” he murmured as they crested the tide of ecstasy together.

She gasped and an expression of sheer bliss swept over her face. “I love you too, baby.”

He pulled her up and wound his arms around her back, drawing her so close they could barely take a breath while coming down from the sexual high. Their eyes met. Hers glistened with euphoric afterglow and he had no doubt his expression paralleled hers. They gazed at each other for several intense moments before merging into a sizzling kiss heavy with tongue. She coiled around him in the most delightful manner. His spirit soared over having this mysteriously alluring woman back in his arms. Nothing had ever felt more right.

They eased from the deeply stirring kiss and wrapped around each other, taking their time to descend from the heavenly rapture of lovemaking. He inhaled deeply at her neck, taking in her light

floral scent. Night sounds provided enchanting music, as nature seemed to embrace their union.

After enjoying another round of passion and even more intense orgasmic highs, they clung to one another, panting for breath. Slivers of light from a full moon danced off her hair and her naturally tanned skin glistened with a light sheen of sweat. When she had been completely satisfied in every way after hours of intimacy he eased back while gazing into her sultry eyes.

"Would you like to take a ride?" he asked.

"Where to?"

"I thought maybe you'd enjoy riding down to the farm to bask in some victory."

"Do you think any of the drug runners are still there? Maybe we should pack a few weapons."

Trip smiled in adoration. He loved a woman who loved firepower. "I doubt anyone stayed behind after the warning. Draven had obviously split the scene and who knows where the prick is now. But I have no objections to packing heat," he said with a wink. "What's your pleasure tonight, my love?"

A delightful sparkled danced in her eyes and she smiled. "I really like that RPG and an AK-47 would be nice in addition to my shotgun...just in case." She winked. "If they've left any evidence of their drug dealings in the barn I'm going to level it. I want no trace of their filth on my homeland."

Her sweet expression of excitement quickly switched to that of rage. "Those bastards were probably in my house sullyng my home."

Sadness washed over him as he shared her grief. "Unfortunately, you're probably right."

"I cannot dishonor my parents by allowing the stench of Carter and his white pigs to touch them. I'll have to rebuild. I have enough money saved to erect a small cabin until I'm able to rebuild the main house. They would live in a tee pee if necessary just to be home again. We are not a fragile people."

"I've noticed that," he said with a wry grin. "I'll help you. I foresee a bonfire in our near future," he teased to help lighten the sorrow.

Her smile was laced with open gratitude. "What about Pike? Aren't you worried the trail will grow cold?"

Trip shrugged while pondering her words. "Maybe...but—there might be one thing he can't get rid of so easily. I think Draven unknowingly took on a tracking device."

"How so?"

"While Gage was fired up over signing the documents he dropped a comment about a rain stick. Apparently Draven and his crew found one while digging on your farm."

A distant look swept over Shye's face. "So that's why the riders came."

"I assume you knew about them too?"

"Most people in our community have heard of them. I knew about the sacred dances performed with the unique instruments, but many things about our history are a mystery. They are woven into our culture," she told him. "When you grow up in a tribal environment you hear many stories, learn many legends, and see the artwork passed down through generations. Native Americans express their visions or beliefs through art such as painting, beading, and so on. Everything they make carries meaning. The colors they use, the textures and shapes...all symbolize important details of their story...of their lives." Her eyes carried the secrets of tales untold when she gazed at him. "I've seen many modern rain sticks but the original pieces are extremely rare...like the one I held during my time with the riders. If Pike found one of those ancient relics and kept it, he won't have a moment's peace and they will continue following him."

"Why didn't they take his soul on the road then?"

"He didn't have the rain stick with him. They might be searching for the piece. Or..." Her sweet lips curved upward. "Perhaps the riders *are* saving him for you."

## *About the Author*

Austina Love is a multi-published author with various pen names in many different genres with Extasy and Divine Destinies Books. Currently she resides with her husband and two sweet Maltese dogs.

In addition to writing romantic fiction, her passions include music, dance, culture, and creating new recipes in the kitchen. Always the dreamer, never the realist, Austina takes life one day at a time while battling the daily challenge of Meniere's Disease.

She has a deep love for animals and nature, believes strongly in the spirit world and values loyalty most of all in people. Her dream is to visit the ocean many times, preferably on a Harley. The love of her life was a very special Bichon Frise and not a day goes by that she doesn't think of him since his premature passing.

Ambitious and quirky, she loves to laugh. She feels that passion is everything and without passion one is not truly living but merely existing.