MURDER IN YELLOWSTONE

By Sue Denver

Prologue
11 years ago
Continued from Newsletter

Otto shook his head. He couldn't die. If he did — the man he'd overheard would get away with murder.

He'd lied to the man. He'd left a letter with an attorney to send if he died. He was glad of that now.

But would it get Lydia in trouble? He needed to protect her.

How?

He couldn't have more than minutes left to live.

Already he could feel the tiredness creeping up on him. His body was urging him to give up and drift off to a wonderful sleep.

"Dakota," he cried. "Dakota, my cherished daughter."

He'd left her with his wife. Emily was a good woman and a good mother. She might have been a good wife — to the man she really loved. All his life with her, feeling like he could never please her. Like he wasn't good enough. Only to find out he *never* could have pleased her.

He hadn't been able to look at her after that.

But he'd planned to come back for Dakota once she was 18. To let her know she was always in his heart.

She was only seven now.

Otto noticed the wolf chorus had stopped. He was so sleepy. Surprisingly, he was no longer cold.

He sat up on his knees so he could stay awake as long as possible. He spread his hands out wide and looked up into the stars.

Otto prayed to the Great Spirit.

He didn't know how — he'd never done it before.

He asked his spirit animal — the wolves — to intercede for him. To look out for his little girl. To let her know of his love.

Otto prayed until the drugs pulled him into sleep, and he fell over.

Ten minutes later, the spirits took him away.

Chapter 1

I was sitting in my one-room, private investigator office in downtown Tulsa, Oklahoma, with my cowboy boots up on my crappy desk, reminiscing about our successful last case. We'd stopped a sex trafficking ring, found our clients' daughter, and rescued several other young women.

Who am I? My name is Sara Flores and I'm a reasonably attractive 5' 7", 30-something, with shaggy dark hair. I'm a private investigator, a calling I've found after being turned into a werewolf.

Since everyone knows there's no such thing as werewolves, I guard that secret like it means my life — because it probably does.

I was in a good mood because our office war chest was topped off with a new $14 million my tech guru/partner Mason Spencer had stolen from a scumbag billionaire who had purchased four of the women. The man didn't need that hidden bank account anymore — being as how his body was currently feeding fishes at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.

My watch told me it was 5:30 P.M., about time to go home to my wolf-dog Skidi. I was looking forward to a nice, long walk with her — especially because Tulsa temperatures today hit a high of 55 degrees. Not bad for January 11.

In sum, I felt on top of the world.

Until Bill Hanalho walked into my office.

I stood up, surprised to see him.

Bill is the current priest of the Lupiti Nation, a position held before him by his grandfather and his grandfather's grandfather. To continue that lineage, Bill needs to marry a Lupiti woman.

Why is that important? Because I am not Lupiti. Which is the only reason I haven't already tumbled into bed with him and — I'd like to think — the only reason he hasn't returned the favor.

It was also the reason we typically talk on the phone instead of meeting in person. On the phone I wouldn't be face-to-face with his long, black hair hanging halfway to his waist. Or his body — six feet of Western male in well-worn blue jeans and boots.

Tonight he was wearing a light-blue flannel shirt — that looked softer than a cloud. It covered what I knew to be the finest-looking male chest I'd ever seen.

My mouth was dry, and I tried to swallow.

"Sara," he said.

"Bill."

Silence hung between us.

"Sara," Bill said. "I… there's a girl who's gone missing. She was seeking answers about her father. It's… complicated. I think you're the only one with a chance of helping her."

It took me a second to decipher his words. "A client, you mean… sure."

I sat back down behind my desk. I couldn't be disappointed. After all, this was what I did.

"Have a seat and tell me why you think only I can help her."

He sat down and crossed an ankle over one knee. I jerked my eyes back up to his.

I hated how he made me stupid.

"Her name is Dakota Hawking," Bill said. "She came to me because she was seeing visions about her father alone in a snowstorm. She felt someone was trying to kill him."

He hesitated.

I waited.

“Dakota believes her father was trying to communicate with her.…” He trailed off.

“And?”

“He’s dead. He died 11 years ago in a snow storm in Montana — just inside Yellowstone Park.”

I nodded, “I understand why you came to me.”

Two years ago I had my one run-in with this woo woo talk-to-the-dead stuff. I’d been reading historical papers about Lupiti Ceremonies — trying to find out more about Joe White Wolf, the man who turned me then died on me without telling me a damn thing about my new condition. Joe was a shaman and there were ceremonies recorded where a Lupiti shaman could supposedly turn into a wolf.

But I’d also read about different ceremonies held by Lupiti priests, some of whom were supposed to be able to talk to the dead.

I’d swallowed too much champagne alone the New Year’s Eve night before and got the “brilliant” idea to contact Joe from the dead to ask him, basically, WTF!

Bill’s grandfather performed the ceremony, and I actually did hear Joe in my mind — although he wasn’t interested in my questions. He wanted me to kill Bill’s grandfather who, it turns out, had been his arch enemy.

My brain was mushed with peyote and whatever else they had me drink for the ceremony, but the upshot was that I got no answers to my questions and the priest died.

And no, I didn’t kill him.

“Obviously, I know it’s possible,” I said. “But I don’t… I wouldn’t have a clue how to help you.”

“Think of her as a normal missing-person case. A girl who went to investigate her father’s death and has now disappeared. You just needed to know the father’s message because, although his death was ruled an accident, it’s possible he was murdered.”

I nodded. “Which would make it more likely her disappearance is connected to his death.”

“I’m afraid for Dakota’s life.”

“I’ll talk to her mother tomorrow morning,” I said.

Bill sat there.

I looked at him. “What else?”

“You’ll meet her. Draw your own conclusions.” He stood up. “Thank you.”

Bill stared at me, then turned and left.

I realized we never touch when we meet or say goodbye. No handshake. No kiss on the cheek. No pat on the back.

I don’t know his reasons, but I was afraid touching him might burn me.

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