

Murder in Yellowstone
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PROLOGUE

Otto Hawking awoke to a blinding headache and complete blackness. His body was bouncing up and down and his head hit on a spot so sore it couldn't have been the first time.

Where was he?

There was the harsh whine of a chainsaw... no... a snowmobile.

He tried to sit up, but his arms and legs were slow to respond and could move only inches. He was trapped in something soft... a blanket? And... were straps holding him down?

He blinked his eyes and shook his head. His brain was foggy. He was tied up like cargo and someone was moving him on a snowmobile.

Where?

More importantly — why?

He took stock. *I'm Otto Hawking. I'm in... Big Sky, Montana? No... I'd left there. I was going... I was driving...*

His head spun and he gasped for breath.

He laughed, then stopped suddenly.

That was weird. This was not funny.

Where was he... Yes! He'd stopped for the night in West Yellowstone, Montana. He was going home to Oklahoma.

But why?

He liked his life in Big Sky. He had good work and he'd found a good woman. Why would he be going back to Oklahoma and the wife who married him instead of the man she really loved?

Hell no, he wouldn't go back to her. Going back made no sense.

He shivered. He was cold, even wrapped in a blanket. Maybe he should just sleep awhile. The idea sounded wonderful.

“Ow!” He awoke again as his head bounced on that same painful spot.

He tried to roll over but his body was strangely limp and slow to obey him. He struggled.

His hands and feet were tied together! Not with flex ties — nothing was cutting into his body. Something wider. Something that wouldn’t leave marks?

Think! What is going on?

He gasped again for breath — as if he’d been running for miles.

Was someone taking him to a doctor? It was a funny way to go to the doctor.

He started to laugh.

No! He forced his mouth to stop smiling. His wrists and ankles were bound. How could he have forgotten that? What was wrong with him?

He was in deep trouble.

“No shit, Sherlock,” he said, laughing again.

Suddenly, the snowmobile started climbing and he was slammed back against something metal. His nose hit hard and he saw stars.

Gosh, they were pretty. Red stars mixed in with the white ones.

He bounced more as the terrain got rougher. The chainsaw whine was even louder.

Then it shut off.

They were still.

The world was silent. Not a sound anywhere.

Otto bounced as the driver got off the machine. His head jerked when someone grabbed the cloth around it, and suddenly he could see. The white lights of the snowmobile nearly blinded him, so he turned away. He was fastened to the floor up against three seats that sat behind the driver’s seat.

It was night and snowflakes fell on his face — leaving wet spots so cold they burned.

He smiled. *My god it was gorgeous.*

Suddenly a man’s face popped into his view, hanging over him.

“You!” Otto said, a wave of tension flooding him. “You!”

The man released one of the clasps and jerked Otto to a sitting position. Then he released the bindings over his legs.

Otto struggled, but the blanket — it *was* a blanket — still held him. The man grabbed him and jerked him off the snowmobile — letting him drop onto the snow-covered ground.

Otto struggled and kicked, his heart racing, his lungs gulping for more air. His heart pounded with fear. And he was angry.

Finally — finally! — he escaped the blanket.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked, managing to sit up.

A wave of nausea hit him and he spewed vomit onto the man. He rolled away and vomited again.

He looked up and saw the look on the man’s face — which made him laugh.

The man grimaced in hatred and he stepped toward Otto. He raised his boot, aiming his kick, but... he jerked to a stop.

“Goddamnit!” the man said, his entire body shaking with the need to kick Otto. “It’s bad enough I have to waste four cold hours out here to dump you, but now this?”

Otto looked up at him. He was afraid he knew the answer, but he asked anyway, “Why didn’t you kick me?”

“Can’t leave any marks,” the man said.

Just as Otto feared. “I wasn’t going to do anything about what I heard. This is unnecessary.”

“I got my orders.” The man grabbed the blanket from the ground and stowed it back on the snowmobile. Then he reached inside his jacket and removed a syringe.

I’ve been drugged, Otto realized. Of course — no wonder I can’t think straight.

And now the man would finish the job. Unless... Otto had just one chance — maybe.

He sat back in the snow and held his stomach, groaning. Trying to look more helpless.

The man came towards him, and Otto raised his tied hands and grabbed the man’s arm. He’d always had a very strong grip, but tonight... tonight his arms felt like noodles. He tried to hold on but the man easily pushed him off, shoved him back in the snow, and jabbed the needle into his neck.

He pulled out a knife and cut away the bindings on Otto's hands and legs, putting the cloth remnants into one of his pockets. Then he patted Otto down and removed his cell phone, which he laid on a snow-covered rock and smashed with his boot.

He climbed back on the snowmobile.

Otto took stock. He had a leather jacket, no gloves, nothing for his head, and cowboy boots. They had some tread on them — he wouldn't slip and slide on the ice. But they wouldn't keep out the water for very long.

"Hawking," the man said.

Otto looked up.

"You're eight miles inside Yellowstone, past an entrance that is closed for the winter. There's nobody anywhere around and nobody coming. You can waste your last minutes trying to walk out if you want. Up to you."

The man turned the sled and headed away, darkness returning as his lights dimmed and then disappeared.

The whine of the snowmobile lasted a little longer, then faded away leaving a smothering silence.

Otto imagined he could feel the drug moving through his body, dimming the lights in his brain, turning down the energy in each muscle, one by one, draining him.

He considered building a snow cave, but his body was wet. He'd sweated in fear, and his wet body would kill him quickly — snow cave or not.

He rose to his feet. He'd walked eight miles before. He'd walked fifty. He could do it again. But his knees trembled, and his legs collapsed beneath him.

He had no paper or pen he could write with. No way to tell anyone what had happened to him. He'd always dictated ideas to his phone. He crawled to the rock where the pieces of it lay. He could see the phone had sent its last message.

So, he thought. This was it.

What the hell does a man do when facing his death? If he was Pawnee or Apache or most of the Plains tribes — he'd sing a death song. But Otto was Lupiti. They didn't have death songs — at least not as far as he knew.

Then, soft, far away, Otto heard a howl. One of the Yellowstone wolves. A second wolf joined in. Then another.

Now there was a chorus of howls.

How did they do that?

Each wolf's song was separate — a wolf's own choice of pitch, length, and movement up and down the scale. And yet they meshed into a single melody. Almost a group prayer. Or celebration. Or... a belonging ceremony.

The wolf was Otto's spirit animal. He chose it — or it chose him — when he was just a boy. But he hadn't thought about it in a long time. After all, what practical value did a spirit animal have in today's world?

And, yet...

There they were. Almost like they were sending him off to the next world. Otto smiled.

Then he laughed.

It had to be the drug.

Otto wondered what he'd been given. He'd been stupidly happy since he woke up tonight. Well... if you had to die... stupidly happy was better than most of the alternatives.

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, he'd never felt he could please her. He'd believed 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 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 ONE

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 client's 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 that 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. That way 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...”

[The full book is available here on this site, plus from every online book retailer.]