

A Lakota Wish

Serial killings of tourists in the Black Hills of South Dakota are investigated by FBI Agent, Ross Patten. Victims, while murdered by various methods, have their chest pierced, post mortem, by ritualistic arrows added as a signature by the killer. The investigation focuses on motive, which may be revenge by a member of the Sioux tribe, whose land was taken by the U.S. over a hundred and forty years ago. (13 pages)

I wasn't surprised to be called in. Some of the murders occurred in national parks, and the local police had no experience with serial killers. Why would they? Last year, there were only ten murders in the entire state of South Dakota. But in the last three weeks, there had been seven in and around the Black Hills, and for the past week, the national media had covered the grisly details, providing the Black Hills with much undesirable publicity.

Detective Marsha Spencer from the Rapid City Police Department met me at the airport. She was assigned to be my partner for as long as took to solve the case. As I placed my suitcase in the trunk of her car, she asked, "Where do you want to begin?"

The first two murders occurred in the Badlands -- two hikers. The third was a woman stabbed outside Evans Plunge in Hot Springs. The fourth and fifth were sadly young honeymooners killed in their bed and breakfast cabin outside of Deadwood, apparently while they slept. The sixth was strangled in the parking lot at Mount Rushmore. The latest, yesterday morning, was a fly fisherman in Custer State Park.

"Let's start with the most recent. You can brief me on the others."

As she drove toward the town of Custer, with her eyes on the road, I evaluated my new partner as she spoke. Marsha was pretty, with shoulder length blonde hair, and blue eyes. She appeared to be in good physical shape, with an attractively trim figure, and

muscular arms -- for a man or a woman. As she talked about the case, her descriptions were concise. She didn't show the stress she was under as the first and only female detective on the Rapid City Police force. She was all business, which was unfortunately appropriate, for I usually enjoy a little flirting. So I just watched and listened.

Marsha talked about the seven victims who were all tourists. She said, "Ross, we've never had this kind of problem here. And even though the murders were committed miles apart, and even though two were stabbed, one strangled, and four shot, it's obviously the same killer based on the notes we found pinned to each victim."

"Tell me about the notes." I knew that many serial killers liked to ensure they received credit for their depraved handiwork by leaving some kind of signature at the scenes of their crimes. Sometimes it might be a unique way of positioning the corpses, or drawings on the wall using the victims' own blood. Last year in Kansas City, the killer left copies of the bible at each crime scene. In that case, the killer had been the son of a Presbyterian minister and had severe religious issues. In the current Black Hills murders, the killer's signature was a note pinned by an arrow to the chest of the victims.

Marsha shook her head and answered. "All of them were written in Sioux -- specifically, Lakota -- according to our expert. All very brief. All on a standard letter-size page of typing paper. Each one was different, and they were peculiar and vague. But they all related to the past controversy involving the Sioux, and their claim that the white man illegally took their land."

Before thinking, I blurted out, "The white man *did* take their land."

The look on Marsha's face was more one of exasperation than anything else. She said, "I know. Really, I *do* know that. But there's nothing that can be done about it now."

I agreed.

Marsha talked about the notes. "Some were just dates. One was just the year, 1868, which our expert says was the year of the treaty made with the Sioux that began the whole problem. The promises made by our government that were later broken. Another was 1980 -- that's the year the Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. Government had indeed violated that treaty. The note at Mt. Rushmore was just numbers separated by dashes: nine, five, seventy-seven."

I was curious and asked, "Another date?"

Marsha nodded, "We think so. Crazy Horse, probably the most important Sioux leader, was killed by a soldier who stuck a bayonet in his back on September 5th, 1877. The note on the woman stabbed at Evans Plunge said that she wasn't welcome in our healing waters." She explained, "Evans Plunge is an indoor water park in Hot Springs. It used to be a warm-water spring considered sacred by the Sioux and Cheyenne."

I said, "You're right, Detective Spencer. Those messages are peculiar, but obviously you've identified the theme."

"Ross, call me Marsha."

I smiled and nodded.

We arrived at the Sheriff's office in Custer, a town with a population just under 2,000 residents that had done little over the past one hundred and fifty years to alter its

frontier appearance. I thought it was a beautiful setting, nestled in green pastures surrounded by mountains brimming with dark green fir trees. The wide main street was lined with old buildings reminiscent of the times Custer was a boom town. We went inside.

I showed the sheriff my identification, and said, “Sheriff Tate, I’m Ross Patten, from the FBI office in Chicago. Sorry about your trouble.”

Jeremy Tate was obviously sorry too, as he said, “We haven’t had a murder here since before I was born. It’s a horrible mess.”

The sheriff said the fisherman’s body was discovered yesterday just before noon by other fishermen. That he’d been shot in the back.

Marsha asked, “Was there a note?”

Sheriff Tate stepped to his desk, and from the top drawer produced two plastic bags. One contained an arrow, with dried blood on the point. The other held the note which had blood stains from the victim’s chest where it had been pinned by the murderer. As he handed the bag with the note to me, he said, “It’s not in English. I hear it’s written in some Indian language, like the others.”

“Sioux,” Marsha said.

Suddenly, the front door of the sheriff’s office flew open, and a short, fat bald man wearing jeans and a bolo tie rushed in. Jeremy Tate frowned as he said, “Good day, Mayor.”

Mayor Johnson ignored the greeting and looked at me and asked, “You the guy from the FBI?”

I nodded.

The mayor continued, “You’ve got to catch that son of bitch. This is ruining us.” His face was red as he spoke and a large vein protruded from the top of his bald head. “Everyone is canceling their summer vacations. Hotels, our bed and breakfasts, our fishing guides. My phone’s ringin’ off the hook. It’s only May, and if we don’t stop these killings now, a lot of people will go out of business if we don’t have our normal summer.”

The sheriff and my partner remained silent. I didn’t know what to tell this man, so I just promised, “I’ll do my best.”

But the mayor wasn’t finished. “This area depends on our tourists. Not just here in Custer, but in Deadwood, Hot Springs, Spearfish, Hill City, Sturgis, Keystone. Everywhere, even Rapid City itself.”

I repeated, “Your honor, I’ll do everything I can.”

When the mayor left the sheriff’s office, without a “goodbye,” I turned to Jeremy Tate and asked, “Can I take the note?”

“Sure.” Sheriff Tate handed me the plastic bag.

Then I asked Marsha Spencer, “Who’s this expert you’ve been talking about? Can we go pay him a visit, and show him this last note?”

As we drove toward Rapid City on Highway 16, Marsha informed me about their expert. “His name is Bob Pittman -- he prefers to be called Curly. He’s a civilian. A fifth or sixth generation local. He’s an expert on all the local Native American lore, and he called us to volunteer his services. He’s been very helpful. He has a gift shop just west of Rapid City, and he has a limo service.” She laughed, and continued, “Well, it’s

actually a late nineties Chevy Tahoe, with ‘Black Hills Shuttle’ stenciled on the front doors.”

When we arrived at Curly’s, the Tahoe was parked in front. To me, Curly’s was more of a junk shop than a gift shop. Native American artifacts, including old bows and arrows, tomahawks, blankets, beads, headdresses, ceramics, and more. There was also a lot of dust. Some of the items for sale were labeled as authentic, but most were newly made by local artisans. Curly was sitting behind the counter, wearing jeans, a buckskin vest, moccasins, and a beaded headband with a feather sticking straight up in the back. His light brown hair suggested that he was not a real Native American.

Although we hadn’t been introduced, and I hadn’t said a word, Curly looked at me and asked, “You got a letter for me?”

Marsha, who Curly had recognized, said, “Unfortunately we do. From a fisherman in the park.”

It took Bob Pittman less than a minute to provide a translation. He proudly read the note, first in the language in which it was written, and then in English, “Now it is a land where your people lie buried.” The word, “your,” was underlined.

I’m always impressed by someone who has a skill I don’t have, but I needed more than a mere translation from Curly. I asked, “Do you know what that means?”

He smiled, and answered. “It’s another reference to Crazy Horse. When he was wrongfully incarcerated, he was asked, ‘Where’s your land now?’ His response was, ‘My land is where *my* people lie buried’.”

I looked at Marsha while she retrieved the note from Curly and replaced it in the plastic bag. I asked her, “Does your department suspect the killer is a Native American?”

Before she could answer, Curly blurted out, "Of course, it is."

Marsha quickly and firmly stated, "We have no suspects at the present time."

Curly glanced at my new partner and asked, "Note attached by another arrow?"

We both nodded.

I expected more from Curly, the expert, and was not disappointed. He said, "Everyone around here benefits from the tourists, *except* the Indians. What would happen if tourists stop coming to the Black Hills?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

The expert continued, "The mines are playin' out. Fifty more years at the most, and that industry will be over. The damn environmentalists have already all but killed our forestry industry. So tourism is the only way for the white man to make a livin' in the hills. If tourists stop comin' here, eventually there'll be no reason for the white man to be here. It's simple. It's definitely an Indian."

I thanked Curly, and Marsha and I returned to our car. I asked, "Who can tell us about local Native Americans? Who might know if there's anyone -- a Native American -- who might be capable of, or motivated to kill tourists?"

Marsha looked at her watch. It was almost noon. She said, "I know someone, but he lives about an hour away."

I nodded and said, "Let's go."

On the way, Marsha took a detour and showed me the Badlands, which were every bit as awe inspiring as the Grand Canyon, which I'd seen when I was twelve years old. As she drove, she talked about our next possible source of information. "His name is Chief Joseph Cloud Rider. The senior chief on the reservation. They hold monthly

meetings of the elders -- Tribal Councils -- where they discuss problems and opportunities on the reservation. Mostly they're social meetings, but if anybody there knows about the murders, Chief Joseph will have heard about it."

I'd heard about the Pine Ridge Reservation, but was not prepared for what I saw. I didn't know exactly what I'd expected to see, but it wasn't the abject poverty that was evident as we approached the place where I would meet Marsha's next expert. Substandard houses, rusted trailers, cars without wheels that Marsha informed me were living quarters for many of the descendants of a once proud people. It was sad. But I had a job to do, and I tried to not think about what had happened to these people since the white men expanded the American frontier to this area.

The Pine Ridge civic center, was a one-story cinder block building, with no landscaping -- nothing to detract from its unsightly appearance. Marsha had telephoned ahead, and Chief Joseph Cloud Rider was waiting for us. We met in a small office in the back of the building, and as we walked to the back, I saw no one else in the building.

Even though he was dressed in pressed khakis, a clean white long-sleeved shirt, and brown loafers, it was quite obvious that the man we would talk to was a Native American. Dark, weathered skin, jet black shoulder-length hair, and eyes that appeared to be windows of untold wisdom and experience. Marsha introduced me.

Chief Joseph said, "So the federal government has come to pay a visit. How nice. What can I do for you? Is it about the murders?"

I said, "Yes, sir. Seven in all. And at each crime scene, a note was left behind that was written in the Lakota language. Those notes were pinned to victims using an arrow believed to resemble those used by the Sioux."

Showing no expression, the chief said, “The Sioux don’t murder. No honor in murder. We fight enemies. These people who were killed were not our enemies.”

I nodded, trying to convey an understanding of the chief’s point of view. I asked, “But maybe someone you know -- someone here at Pine Ridge -- is angry, and is lashing out by killing innocent tourists.”

The chief laughed aloud, and said, “Mr. FBI man, *all* of us living here are angry.” Then he stared at me, and in a solemn voice repeated, “There’s no honor in murdering innocent people.” Then he added, “Murders like these . . . well, that’s a white man’s disease.”

Marsha and I lowered our heads simultaneously, both of us silently admitting that the chief just may be right.

Marsha then spoke, “Chief Joseph, our expert, Curly Pittman, has been working with us. He translated the notes for us, and identified the arrows. A lot of those notes referenced Crazy Horse. He also said that no white man would have a motive for scaring off the tourists. He said that the only people around here who would not be affected by a loss of tourists are the Native Americans.”

Chief Joseph Cloud Rider surprised both of us when he turned his head and spat on the floor. With disdain in his voice he said, “Curly! That is not his given name. It is one he gave himself. I call him by his rightful name, Bob.”

I registered the animosity Chief Joseph felt for Bob Pittman, and wanted to understand the reasons. I said, “But Mr. Pittman seems to be a man who has studied the Sioux, and has a connection with them. What he said makes sense to us, don’t you agree?”

Chief Joseph leaned back in his chair, took a deep breath, and replied, “No. If Bob truly understood Sioux, he’d know that none of us could do such a thing. Bob has been a guest at many of our Tribal Councils. And yes, he has learned much about the Sioux ways, and our history. He has been helpful to us when we needed a white man to talk for us. Once, five years ago, he even asked to join our tribe.”

Marsha raised her eyebrows and asked, “Mr. Pittman wanted to join your tribe?”

The chief answered, “Yes. After a Tribal Council meeting he talked with me and other chiefs. He said he was a Sioux warrior in a previous life. He spoke with his heart, and told us he loved our ways. But we told him, ‘no,’ because he is *not* a Sioux. That’s when he started calling himself by that other name.”

I asked, “Curly?”

The chief nodded, wanted to spit again, but refrained.

Marsha asked, “How did Mr. Pittman take your rejection?”

“With a heavy heart,” Chief Joseph replied. “He asked if there was anything he could do to change our minds.”

My intuition told me it might be important to know more about Curly Pittman, and I waited anxiously for the next words from the chief.

He said, “I told him that if he wanted to be a real Sioux, he would drive the white man forever from our Black Hills. That has been a Lakota wish for many generations.”

On the drive back to Rapid City, I was informed that I had a room at the Ramada Inn. I asked Marsha if someone in her department could provide me with reading

material -- anything about the Sioux, and especially Crazy Horse. She called her office, relayed my request, and then assured me I'd have something waiting for me at the hotel.

When I checked in, there was indeed a package being held for my arrival. It included several books on the Black Hills, and one on Crazy Horse written by a woman named Mari Sandoz. I immediately determined that the book by Sandoz would be my first reading assignment.

I ate dinner alone in the hotel restaurant, and was back in my room by 8:00 PM. I stretched out on my bed and began reading, planning to do so for hours. But within the first pages of my first reading assignment, I discovered a startling fact about the great Chief Crazy Horse. I telephoned my partner.

“Marsha, it’s Ross.”

“Did you get a package from my office?”

“Yes. Thanks. That’s why I’m calling you.”

I knew Marsha Spencer and the local police had relied on Curly Pittman for his valuable assistance on the murders. But I was certain that her expert had to be considered a suspect. I did my best to carefully lay out all the facts.

“Marsha, I think we need to investigate Curly.”

Her response was predictable, as she said, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

I wasn’t. I said, “Humor me. Let’s assume Chief Joseph is right -- that the murderer is not a Native American.”

She replied curtly, “Okay.”

“How many white people do you know who could write notes in the Sioux language -- specifically Lakota? And how many have jobs that would naturally take

them all over the Black Hills area – from Deadwood, the Badlands, Mount Rushmore, Hot Springs, to Custer? A job like a limo service. And who has access to real Sioux arrows?”

Marsha let out a cuss word, and then added, “But he’s helping us. What would be his motive?”

I’d known many serial killers, and every one of them had some sort of delusions. All of them had a purpose to their madness. All of them believed that killing would either provide them with something they wanted, or prevent something bad from happening. In Curly’s case, he wanted something very badly.

I said, “He wants to be a Sioux. He thinks that if the white man leaves the Black Hills, that Chief Joseph will accept him into the tribe. And, Marsha, he’s demented. He may believe that killing tourists will shut down the Black Hills and that everyone living here now will eventually leave.”

She understood the logic, but said, “Ross, I just don’t know. It’s hard for me to believe. I know he’s sort of weird . . . but a serial killer?”

I had one more piece of information to share, and asked, “Guess what Crazy Horse was called during his boyhood -- before he became a great Sioux chief?”

She didn’t know.

“According to Mari Sandoz, the author of a book on Crazy Horse, he was known as Curly.”

At 10:15 PM, Marsha and I were standing at the front door of Curly’s gift shop. There was a light on, and we could see Curly sitting at the counter, bent over, and writing

something on a piece of paper. Behind us were two of Rapid City's finest, with their guns drawn. At the back of the gift shop, there were two more local policemen, I hoped with their guns also at the ready.

I didn't bother to knock. I kicked open the door, and within seconds, a very startled Curly was being held by two policemen as he was handcuffed by Marsha Spencer. It was her bust. She and I looked at the counter where Curly had been sitting, and saw the note written in a language we could not read. Next to the note was an arrow, that thankfully would never be used for the purpose Curly had intended.

I looked at Curly, pointed at the note and asked, "What does it say?"

Defeated, but defiant, Curly answered as before, first in the Lakota language, and then in English. He said, "Wounded Knee."