

TAKING LIVES

Coyote is always out there waiting, and coyote is always hungry.

Navajo

Good and Evil are Constantly at War, and Good Men Must Choose.

Nelson Mandela

Two Years Previous . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Victorville, California

Pete slipped on a pair of blue surgical gloves and knelt down on one knee next to the ME, while Summer did the same but on the other side of the body.

Because it was desert, there was some decay and a whole lot of stink, but that didn't bother Kelliher much. Not at all actually. What bothered him was that the dead body they were examining was that of a boy whose life was taken and extinguished way before it should have been.

"The desert air is dry so there isn't the amount of decomposition and decay you might find, let's say, in the Midwest, but I'm guessing this kid has been here for forty-eight hours, give or take. Looking at the dark sand around the boy's head, I would say that was a blood pool, and that he was shot right here with a small caliber weapon. I'd say a .38. Entry looks to be from above and behind, so the boy was kneeling and the shooter stood behind him. You can see stippling and some powder burns, so it was at close range. We'll get samples from the sand but I think that's what we'll find."

"I'm guessing this boy was, what, twelve or thirteen or so?" Pete asked.

The ME nodded and said, "That seems about right. Could be a little older."

“What do you make of the marks on the boy’s back?” Summer asked.

The ME sighed and shook his head in disgust. “I can’t be absolutely certain until I get him back to the lab, but I think he was whipped with a strap. I’d guess leather. I’ll know better when I perform an autopsy.”

“And the mark on his left ankle?” Pete asked. “It looks like an upside-down cross. Was that branded on him?”

“Looks that way,” the ME answered quietly.

“I’m going to get a picture of the boy’s face and send it to the National Center for Missing Children. Hopefully, Ernie Allen will find a match,” Summer said.

“Jesus Christ,” Pete said. “What are we dealing with?”

Pete knew what she was thinking because he was thinking the same thing. Two dead boys found in the same position, in the same way, one in the High Desert of California off I-15, the route that would take one to Vegas, and the other north of Reno and west of Gerlach in the Smoke Creek Desert of Nevada. And just like the other boy that was found, there was no doubt in Pete’s mind that the autopsy will find signs of forced sex. The only differences between the two boys was that the fourteen year old boy found in Nevada, Blake from California, had dark hair, while this boy had sandy blond hair. And Blake didn’t have a brand on his ankle like this kid did.

Pete stood up, beat a little sand from his pant leg, stretched his sore back and faced the three young men still sitting on or standing near their dirt bikes.

“Okay, which one of you discovered the body?”

Agent Pete Kelliher worked out of D.C. with the Crimes Against Children Unit, sometimes called Kiddie Corps by other agents. Before that, he had been a detective with

Baltimore homicide. He and his partner, Agent Summer Storm, had flown three hours by plane out of Reagan National to Ontario International Airport forty miles east of L.A., and then jumped into a helicopter and flew another twenty minutes or so up into the High Desert area east of Victorville where this boy was found nude and handcuffed, and very dead.

A long-haired, twenty-something, dark male dressed in lime-green leathers coated in dust and dirt raised his hand and said, "Me. I found him."

Kelliher nodded at him and said, "Can you step over here so we can talk?"

He moved off and away from lime-green's two buddies, fellow dirt bikers, and waited for lime-green to join him and Storm.

"Your name is . . ."

"Herc Moffet."

"Herc?" Summer asked.

"Hercule."

Storm pursed her lips and nodded.

"Go through your story for us, please," Summer asked tiredly.

"My friends and I come up here on Saturdays and ride. You know, just messing around. Usually, we ride on the other side of I-15, south of Hesperia, but we wanted to do something different, so we came over here on the Victorville side. We know the museum is over here, so we needed to stay away from there."

"Museum?" Pete asked.

"Yeah, the Roy Rogers Museum. It's back there about three or four miles."

Summer recalled seeing the structure from the helicopter and had wondered what it was.

"Okay, go on," Summer said.

“We were racing and I shot over that little ledge,” he said, pointing at a rocky outcrop that looked a lot steeper than *a little ledge*.

Kelliher and Storm exchanged a look, and then turned back to Moffet.

“I damn near landed on top of him. I knew Clancy was on my tail and Devin comin’ on quick, so I ran back up the ledge and flagged them down before they landed on me and the kid.”

“And you guys have never biked here before?” Kelliher asked.

Moffet shook his head and said, “No, never. First time.” He looked over his shoulder at the dead kid and added, “Shit, probably won’t ever again.”

Herc Moffet and his buddies, Tommy Clancy and Devin White, were in their second year at Cal State San Bernardino. Moffet studied Mass Communications. Clancy was in Pre-Law, and White, Pre-Med.

Background checks on all three had been completed by a computer geek attached to Kiddie Corps, and all three were clean. Moffet worked part-time as a bartender. Clancy didn’t hold any job, while White did work-study in the library.

After talking to and questioning Moffet, Kelliher and Storm turned their attention to Clancy and White, who gave virtually the same account. There didn’t seem to be any inconsistency or any cause to doubt them.

Before they let them go, Summer said, “Hey guys, before you leave, do you have cell phones?”

“Yeah, sure,” Moffet answered for them, while Clancy and White nodded.

“You fellas on Facebook, Twitter, and maybe Instagram?”

“Some,” Clancy said warily.

Kelliher nodded and smiled knowingly.

“Just so you know,” Summer said. “If any pictures appear on anything, and that would include on your device or on anyone else’s device, you will be tampering with a crime scene, interfering with a criminal investigation, and any chance you have of finishing college or getting into grad school will be flushed down the toilet.”

The three guys paled.

“So, what I would like you to do right now is to delete every picture you took of that little boy, and delete any post you made on any social media. You have one minute.” She turned to her partner and said, “Pete, get ready to call Chet and let him know to begin a search of their media because if everything isn’t erased in,” she made a show of looking at her watch, “forty seconds, I will arrest these gentlemen on federal charges.”

Cell phones came out of pockets and fingers flew over the keys.

She waited a bit, and for good measure to prod them on, Summer said, “Twelve, eleven, ten . . .”

“Okay, okay, wait a minute,” Moffet said in panic.

When she was satisfied they were done, she said, “Okay, you guys can go, but if there are any comments anywhere to anyone and we find out, same holds true about compromising our investigation.”

“You can’t be serious,” Clancy protested.

Kelliher walked up to him and said, “Son, do you really think we’re anything but serious?”

Clancy took a step back, looked over his shoulder at Moffet, looked back at Kelliher, and shook his head.

After the three men jumped on their bikes and rode off, Pete and Summer huddled away from the ME and his assistant, and away from the two San Bernardino Sheriff Deputies, and the two FBI agents out of LA.

“What are you thinking?”

Pete looked at her and said, “Same as you, I think.”

Summer nodded sadly.

Pete was fiftyish, had a paunch, a head of mostly gray hair on his head in a neat and tidy flattop. He looked military but was actually quite the opposite. He might have pulled his .45 six or seven times, but hadn't fired it in years, though he was an excellent shot. He was considered by many in the FBI as a cop's cop, a true investigator who had a good mind, who was thorough and detailed. Pete tended to be a loner who had never married. He was mostly serious, mostly quiet, and off the job, kept to himself, often watching Clint Eastwood or John Wayne movies in the dark of his living room in his three bedroom Colonial in Georgetown.

His partner received her first name because she was born in the backseat of a station wagon on a hot July night with hail, thunder and lightning rocking the car. Her parents thought first of Hailey, but settled on Summer, liking how it sounded together: Summer Storm. Pete was old enough to be her father and saw her—and even treated her—as his daughter and she grumbled about it, but Pete paid no attention. The FBI recruited her out of the University of Louisville where she had graduated from law school.

They were an odd team: he sullen, rumped and gray; she trim and proper. Together, they were also very good at what they did.

“We have two boys. Both nude. Both handcuffed. Both shot at close range in the back of the head twice with a .38. This boy was branded, while the other kid wasn't. That and hair

color are the only differences. We don't know yet, but I'm willing to bet this boy here will have the same signs of forced sex that the other boy had."

Summer nodded and said, "We know the first boy we found, Blake Johnson, was missing for two years from Spokane. His parents suspected that he was kidnapped."

"So you think that maybe, whoever kidnapped Blake also took this boy."

"And if that's the case," Summer said.

"Then we might have a serial abductor, a pedophile preying on pre-pubescent boys," Pete answered for her.

"And if that's the case, just how many other boys are out there?" Summer wondered out loud.

CHAPTER TWO

Fishers, Indiana

Austin Hemple looked over at him and asked, “You nervous?”

Brett shrugged, made a face like he didn’t have a care in the world, and then shook his head.

“Are you thinking about him?”

Still looking out over the track infield where he and Austin sprawled waiting for the sprint coach to tell the track team to warm up, he answered, “A little.”

“Then you’re nervous,” Austin said.

Brett ignored him. Instead, he leaned down over his legs that were out in front of him, reached with both hands and grabbed his bare feet, his nose touching a spot between his legs, and held that position for a four count. Then he spread both legs out, stretching them as far to either side as he could, bent at his waist, and stretched out his arms in front of him, his nose nearly touching the grass beneath him.

For a fifth grader, Brett McGovern was put together. A complete package as sports commentators might say about an athlete. He was smart in the classroom when he wanted to be, which was most often. Though Brett was on the short side, he had a six-pack and a broad muscular chest with shoulders to match. He had thick, well-defined thighs, with thin but muscular calves. Sprinter’s legs. His skin tone was naturally dark, which in the sun, turned an even darker that was a tribute to his Italian heritage, a gift from his mother and her side of the family.

He took care of his body, which was remarkable for an eleven year old, but then again, Brett seemed older and more mature than others of his age. He was cautious in what he ate and drank because he considered himself an athlete, knew deep down in every fiber of his being that

he was an athlete. He had national times in the 100, the 200, and in the long jump. On top of all that, he was a cute young man. A very cute young man.

Everyone told him that he and his little brother, Bobby, looked like mini-Tom Brady's minus the cleft chin. And while most any boy his age might have taken that as a compliment, Brett didn't because his favorite quarterback was and forever would be Payton Manning.

Brett excelled at football as a running back and safety and played on an AAU team out of Indianapolis called the Bombers. His buddy, Austin, was the quarterback. The two of them also played on an AAU basketball team together with Brett being the better of the two, but that didn't matter, because Brett and Austin were best friends. In fact, the two were pretty much inseparable.

"Look, there he is."

Brett glanced over in the direction Austin was staring.

Da'Shawn Grimes was a seventh grader at a city school in Indy. Big, muscular, skin the color of dark chocolate, long dreds that dangled onto his shoulders, he walked in front of a group of his teammates, a girl on his right, a guy on his left. The others laughed at something, but Grimes saw Brett looking at him and stared back. He was so intent on Brett that he didn't respond to whatever was funny, and ignored the shove from the guy on his left.

He stopped, said something to the group, and then left them, and walked slowly towards Brett.

"Here he comes," Austin whispered.

Grimes stood over Brett and said, "You McGovern?"

Brett looked up at him and said, "Yeah. You Grimes?"

He sat down on the grass facing Brett and Austin and began stretching out just as Brett was.

“Austin, I’ll catch up with you later, okay?”

Austin stared first at Brett, then at Grimes, and then got up and walked away.

“Dude, what are you racing today?”

Brett said, “Same as you. The hundred, two hundred, and the four by two.

Da’Shawn nodded and said, “Dude, I guess we’ll be seeing each other a lot today.”

“Looks that way.”

They stretched in silence for a little while and then Grimes stopped, leaned back on an elbow and said, “What’s your best sport?”

Truth was, Brett liked everything and didn’t really have a favorite. He just liked to compete, liked the challenge, and liked to push himself.

So he said honestly, “I like them all, except baseball. Baseball is a cure insomnia.”

Grimes laughed with Brett and then said, “You’re pretty smart, aren’t you?”

Brett’s shrug was his only answer.

Grimes nodded and said, “I saw you play basketball once or twice. Pretty good. I read about you in football. But track.” He stopped, shook his head and smiled, “Dude, you can flat out fly for a white boy.”

Brett grinned. “I like them all.”

“Except baseball,” Grimes said with a laugh.

Brett laughed and said, “Yeah, except baseball.”

“I need to do good ‘cause I gotta get outta here. Dude, I got nothin’ here. Nothin’. I gotta do good.”

“You have national times, too, Da’Shawn. You’re doing really well in track.”

“Yeah, but, *really well* is only *really well*.”

Brett wasn’t sure what he meant.

“Dude, look, I gotta get to my team. I’ll catch you later, okay?”

Brett knuckle bumped him and said, “Good luck.”

Grimes laughed and said, “Dude, luck’s got nothin’ to do with it. But I’ll tell you what.

When I pass your scrawny white ass, I’ll try not to fart in your face.”

Brett laughed and said, “I’d appreciate it, Da’Shawn, but you might not have to worry about that.”

CHAPTER THREE

Fishers, Indiana

Tony Dominico, Brett's uncle, stood by the fence and watched his nephew talk to the other kid- the opponent- and didn't like it at all. Brett should be focusing. He should focus on winning the race and not letting the Grimes kid mess with his mind.

Dominico was an Indianapolis detective in the narcotics squad. Back in the day, like his nephew, he was a star athlete through middle school, high school and in college at the University of Indiana. At six-two and two hundred and twenty pounds, he still kept himself in shape. Dominico worked out at the gym three or four days a week with free weights. He'd pound a heavy bag every now and then, and jump rope for twenty minutes every day. If that wasn't enough, he ran six to ten miles before dawn in any kind of weather. And, it was at his uncle's insistence that Brett begin pumping weights, which is why Brett was as developed as he was.

He knew Brett didn't like pep talks or any rah rah crap, but Dominico felt he needed to help Brett regain his focus if he was going to beat the Grimes kid. So he hopped over the fence, crossed the track and walked to the center where Brett sat stretching with a couple of his teammates.

"Guys, can I talk to my nephew for a minute or two?" he said, fully expecting the boys to leave, which they did.

When they left, he said, "Brett, what the hell were you thinking talking to that Spade right before you have to race him? Huh? What were you thinking?"

Brett glared at him defiantly and said, "I wasn't thinking anything!"

"Exactly! You weren't thinking at all. You let him get inside your head. What did he do? Tell you how awful his life is? Try to get you to feel sorry for him?"

"He didn't do any of that," Brett hissed.

“Don’t you understand, Brett? You have a chance to beat this guy. You and he have the best times in the state and two of the best times in the nation. Less than a couple of hundredths of a second separates you two and you can finish him today, right now, if you get your shit together and focus.”

Brett fumed. He was so angry he couldn’t respond. He hated anyone talking to him before a race, before a basketball game, before a football game, or before anything. And for his uncle to come onto the track infield, tell his friends to leave, and then start this crap, it was too much.

He grabbed his cleats and stood up and said, “I’m going to go warm up with my team.”

“Brett listen,” Dominico said, reaching out a hand to grab his shoulder.

Brett didn’t give him a chance. He turned his back on him and said, “I have to go.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Fishers, Indiana

He watched Brett stretch and warm up. He focused on the beads of sweat on his face, his upper lip and on his neck. He watched the little sweat rivers trail down his arms, from under his arms, and down his legs. When Brett used the front of his shirt to wipe sweat from his face, he was able to see Brett's chest and stomach.

He had been watching Brett grow and had been *interested* in him for a couple of months. Perhaps obsessed with him. He loved Brett's large brown eyes, the way he cut his brown hair, the fullness of his lips. He would focus on the way Brett's muscles would flex when he walked, ran or threw a football or shot a basketball. He seldom missed one of Brett's games, and he was always around, always nearby, watching, hoping, waiting. Best of all, he enjoyed it when he got close to Brett to catch his scent.

Of course there were other boys, especially in Chicago where he visited as often as he could. He took pleasure in them, with them, but Brett was special. He would watch, and hope, and wait for the right opportunity, the right time.

He knew that Brett's little brother, younger by a year and a few months would grow to be special just like Brett, but Brett was a cut above. Brett was special. He liked Brett's determination, his intensity, even his stubbornness. There was a hardness in Brett, whereas Bobby seemed soft. Too soft for his taste, but then again, maybe that would change.

But for now, he would watch, and hope, and wait. Brett would be his.

Mostly, he would plan. He was very good at planning. Very good at planning.

CHAPTER FIVE
Washington, D.C.

“The boy’s name is Richard Clarke, from Flagstaff, Arizona,” Summer said tiredly. The group known as Kiddie Corps met in a conference room that wasn’t much bigger than a closet. The swivel chairs were padded and comfortable, but they were so jammed up against the long table and walls, they could barely maneuver.

She sat to the right of Logan Musgrave, the section supervisor. Next to her was Douglas Rawson, a tall, thin, elegantly dressed black man who seldom spoke unless he asked a question for clarification. Some in the department suspected he was a beneficiary of affirmative action, but both Pete and Summer liked him and trusted him. He had a good mind. They also knew he was on the ladder climbing to the top, so they didn’t know how long they’d actually have him in the unit.

Across from Summer sat the youngest member of the Crimes Against Children Unit, Chet Walker, the computer guy. Some called the red-haired, freckle-faced guy a computer geek, and that wouldn’t be far from the truth. Pete liked the kid. He was inquisitive, had a ready sense of humor filled with sarcasm, worked tirelessly, and in Pete’s opinion, was the best computer guy in the FBI. Word had it that Walker could hack into anything or anyone without detection. Rumors also had it that it was because of his hacking ability that he worked for the FBI, so perhaps he wasn’t as undetectable as most suspected. Still, he was a good man to have on one’s side in any cyber fight.

“How old was he?” Musgrave asked.

“He was eleven years old, one month shy of his twelfth birthday when he was taken. He was fourteen when he was found.” Storm answered.

“So he was missing a little over two years,” Rawson said.

“This is similar to the other boy . . . who was that? The kid found in Nevada?” Musgrave asked.

“Brian Mullaney,” Pete answered. “Both were shot with a .38 from behind at close range. Both were found nude with their hands cuffed behind their back. Both were kneeling at the time they were shot. Both had signs of prolonged sexual abuse.” Pete paused, ran his hands over his face and said, “Christ.”

“So . . . we have two boys about the same age taken from two different states and murdered at about the same age, but found in two other states from the states they had lived in,” Musgrave said reading over his notes.

“Same weapon, same MO,” Chet added. “What about the brand?” he asked holding up an 8 by 10 glossy.

“I ran it by a profiler in Quantico, and she said a couple of things,” Summer said. “First, the whipping was done with a leather strap. The ME found leather slivers in the wounds. But it wasn’t a fresh branding. It was done at some point while the kid was held captive. She felt the whipping could have been some pervert’s way of getting off. She also suggested that it might be a punishment for something. Second, the brand was likely another punishment, obviously more severe than the whipping. Like an escalation of punishment.” Summer shrugged.

“Could this be one perpetrator?” Musgrave asked.

“Possibly, depending upon the age and strength and size of the perpetrator. At least that’s what the profiler speculated.”

“Was she able to give us a profile of who we’re looking for?” Rawson asked.

“Well, we know most pedophiles are white male, twenty to fifty, single, who don’t get along well with their own peer group, and who tends to hang around kids of a specific age group

and gender, no real friends,” Summer answered. “Other than that . . .” she trailed off with a shrug.

“Chet, were you able to make any connections between the two boys? Any similarities? Differences?” Musgrave asked.

Chet shrugged noncommittally. “They weren’t related. One kid, Mullaney, had dark hair. Clarke had blond hair. Both were taken at about the same age, and both were murdered at about the same age. Both came from middle class families. Both had at least one sibling. Both boys were athletic, had good grades in school, and were considered by their parents and others as leaders.”

“So, we don’t really have much,” Rawson said.

“We have squat,” Pete said.

“Technically we can’t call this a serial yet, because we need three victims, points of reference,” Summer said. “But if you look at the death scenes, the MO, the ME reports, the position of the bodies, the weapon, and the handcuffs . . . taking all that together, I think it’s just a matter of time before we find another body, and it will be just like the other two.”

“Shit!” Chet said, just loud enough for everyone to hear, but not realizing he had said it out loud.

That, however, summed up the feeling from everyone sitting around the table.

CHAPTER SIX
Reston, Virginia

The man looked over his shoulder, then across the street in both directions, and then as nonchalantly as he could, punched in the numbers using a disposable, untraceable phone in order to make the call.

“They found two bodies so far.” He stepped on a bug, a beetle of some sort, grinding it into the sidewalk using the toe of his expensive shoe.

“What do they know?”

“Not much . . . yet. But it’s just a matter of time before they begin putting things together,” he answered glancing left and right as if he were bored with the conversation, but taking in any passersby, anyone who might be watching him.

“Can you steer them away from us?”

“I don’t think so. Especially not if they find another body.”

“Who’s working the case?”

“Kelliher and Storm. They’re good.”

“How good?”

“Very. Kelliher is a cop. Thorough. Precise. Storm is sharp and scary smart. Almost as good a cop as Kelliher.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Tell them to find a better location for disposal. One that’s not in the open. One that will be more . . . discreet, hidden. A site where the elements and critters can help with the disposal. I’ll monitor the investigation as best I can, but I have to be careful.”

“I pay you to be careful.”

“Yeah, well,” he answered, wanting the phone call to end.

“I’ll pass it on. Keep in touch.”

“Will do.”

The man ended the call, slipped the phone into his pocket, and pretended to window shop but used the reflection in the glass to see behind him. No one sat in cars. No one paid any attention to him. Whatever foot traffic was on the street kept moving this way and that. Same with the passing cars.

Safe and unsuspected for now. He’d have to keep it that way.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fishers, Indiana

Fortunately for Brett, his team drew the even lanes, so Cosby Middle School from the city would have to run in the odd lanes. Brett didn't like lane one, not that he had ever had to run in it. He didn't like to be on the outside edge, but instead like the middle because he could see who was where. Not overly superstitious, Brett liked even numbered lanes and preferred to run from lane four, which was where he set up his starting block.

He hadn't spoken much to anyone since his uncle had climbed up his ass. He was still pissed off about that, but he had regained his focus. As he got ready for the sprint, he had slowed his breathing and had cleared his mind. From his vantage point, the track, one hundred meters of it anyway, was nothing but a straightaway like an airport runway waiting for him to begin his approach and take off. Except airport runways weren't made of rubberized turf.

Grimes lined up in lane three, just to Brett's left. They hadn't spoken and Brett preferred it that way. He could see the tenseness in Grimes' face, the tautness of the thick muscle in his legs and arms. Brett dismissed it, all of it. He had one goal. One. That's all he thought about. That was the only thing on his mind.

Brett had studied the Starter trying to learn his rhythm. He thought he had it down, especially between the "get set" and the Starter's gun. He wondered if Grimes had done the same because the finish could actually come down to who started the fastest, since they were only three hundredths of a second separating the two of them.

He climbed into his block, stretched and then shook out his right leg, and then did the same to his left, and then relaxed into a semi-crouch ready for the starter's instructions and the gun. Like most sprinters, Brett used his fingertips for balance. His coach and his uncle had differed in how much pressure to place on them, with his uncle wanting more pressure, while his

coach wanted less. Brett resisted the coaching from his uncle because he was comfortable with less pressure. He also didn't like being told what to do. Besides, it had worked for him so far, so he didn't see the need for changing the way he positioned himself in the block.

“Runners to your marks.”

Brett and Grimes were ready, while the other sprinters fidgeted.

“Set.”

The runners balanced on legs and fingers, and most but not all, looked down. Both Grimes and Brett looked down. Both boys knew that the winner would be the one who could get to their top speed the quickest and hold it the longest. Brett intended to be that sprinter. He had no doubt Da'Shawn Grimes had the same intention.

The gun went off and both Brett and Grimes blasted out of their blocks while the other runners were still set. By the ten yard mark, Brett and Grimes were even and well ahead of the pack and both knew it was a two-man race. So did everyone in the stands.

At the fifty and seventy-five meter marks, they were still even, and neither were straining. Feet flew. Arms and legs pumped in precise motion. Brett had more lean, while Grimes was more up and down.

At the finish, it looked to everyone like a tie. Looked like a tie. The clock told a different story.

CHAPTER EIGHT
Washington, D.C.

“Pete, we just got word that another body was found,” Summer said. “This time in Michigan.” She hadn’t realized just how hard she clutched her phone.

Pete sighed, a hand running over his face that ended up on his flattop. He didn’t have to ask who. He didn’t have to ask if it was their case. Like Summer, he just knew. But then the significance of what she had said kicked in.

“Wait! What? Michigan?”

“A remote area near a small town called White Cloud. A fourteen year old boy was found. Same MO. Handcuffs. Nude. Two gunshots to the back of the head. Looks to be from a .38.”

“Jesus! Michigan? What the hell! Nevada. California. Now *Michigan*?”

“Wheels up in 30 minutes.”

“Is the scene secure?”

“State Police and the Detroit FBI office are on it.

Pete paced his office with one hand securely holding his phone, the other on top of his head.

“Summer, if this is the same circumstance and situation as the other two sites . . .”

“Then we have a serial.”

“But in two different parts of the country? Happening at the same time? This might mean . . .”

“More than one perp. Maybe. But we don’t know the timing on this one compared to the other two boys who were found. It could be that the perp started in one area and is moving to another area.”

“Yeah, maybe, but you don’t believe that like I don’t believe that. We have more than one perp.”

“Pete, we have to get out in front of this thing and we have to do it in a hurry. I hate that we’re behind.”

“See you in thirty.”

CHAPTER NINE
Fishers, Indiana

Brett crossed the finish line and ran another thirty yards, jogged another fifteen, then walked back to the finish line still in his lane. Grimes was at the finish line bent over at the waist, a grimace on his face, breathing hard and deep.

Brett's sprint coach, Robbie Coleman, met him at the line, but away from Grimes and the others.

"Well, I have good news and bad news."

"I lost, didn't I?"

Coleman smiled sadly, and said, "Bottom line? Yes, you lost. But only by 5 thousandths of a second. You also had a PR, and as fast as you are, a personal record at the end of April is hard to get."

Brett frowned and asked, "What was my time?"

"You hit 11.51. That's .14 faster than last week, Brett, and like I said, it's only the end of April. You keep improving this quickly and you could be hitting the high tens at the end of May."

Brett nodded and shrugged dismissively.

Coleman put a hand on Brett's shoulder and said, "Brett listen to me, okay? You're the fastest kid I've ever coached. I doubt I'll ever coach anyone as fast as you ever again. You went up against a kid who is just as fast as you."

"He's faster."

Coleman nodded and said, "Yes, by five thousandths of a second. Do you realize how small a margin that is? And think of this. He's in seventh grade. You're in fifth. He's well into his growth spurt, and you've barely begun. He is going to plateau out, probably in high school

before you ever hit your peak. That's a big deal. That's something to remember because you still have to race him in the four by two and in the two hundred meters."

He paused and said, "As hard as it might be, you need to put this behind you pretty quickly because you and your three team members are about to race."

Brett wiped his face off with the front of his shirt, nodded, walked away and found Grimes standing, watching him with both of his hands resting on top of his head.

"Nice race, Da'Shawn."

"For a white boy, you can really fly," he repeated, shaking his head.

Brett smiled and said, "Well, wait until you see me in the two hundred," and he walked away to join his teammates at the start of the relay.

Grimes watched him walk away and then muttered, "Shit!"

CHAPTER TEN

East of Round Rock, Navajo Indian Reservation, Arizona

Tending sheep was boring. There were long stretches of nothing but watching jackrabbits and dust devils and the sun advance from one horizon to the other, while protecting his family's herd from coyotes or from rustlers. Rustlers were actually more common than coyotes.

Like his grandfather had taught him, George Tokay sat among the pinion pine and Joshua trees on the side of the mountain. His horse was tied behind the ridge on the other side of the stand of pines. Across his lap were a loaded Winchester .22, a canteen, and binoculars. In his saddlebag was some jerky that would tie him over until supper. His saddlebag also contained an apple and a carrot for the big, black and wild stallion he was trying to befriend.

His day began before dawn up on a mesa overlooking his family's humble, if not poor, little ranch, with his grandfather, who taught him the Navajo language, along with the traditional prayers and songs of the Navajo people. In less than one month, George would turn twelve in a coming of age ceremony on that same mesa. In the Navajo culture, the day one comes of age is an important day, at least to the traditional Navajo like George and his family. He would receive his Navajo *name* that would only be known to him and his grandfather, unless George chose to share it with others. It was up to him, but frowned upon if not discouraged.

After greeting Father Sun, George and his grandfather headed back to the ranch where he cleaned up, ate a simple breakfast, and along with his brother, William, younger by eighteen months, caught the bus for school.

Their ranch consisted of a three bedroom ranch house. One bedroom was for his grandparents, one was for his mother and sister, who shared the bed, and one for George and his two brothers, the three of them crowded into the same bed. The only other rooms were a kitchen

and a family room. The house was made of wood and heated by a fireplace. His mother and grandmother would cook over a wood stove inside, or if the weather was good, outside, and the weather was mostly good. The only other buildings were an outhouse set back from the house, and a barn that had gaps where wood had either rotted or fallen away. There wasn't running water, electricity, or a phone. But the extended family who lived there was happy and healthy.

George wore his black hair long, well past his shoulders. As often as he could, he spoke the Navajo language, mostly with his grandparents and his mother, and with an older science teacher at the school. George was also fluent in both Spanish and English.

After school and after grabbing a quick snack, if there was one, he would saddle up one of two horses, fill his canteen from the well, check his rifle to make sure it was loaded, and grab some rope for a wandering lamb or sheep, though they pretty much stayed together as they grazed on the side of the hill.

When the wild stallion came over the top of the rise to graze along with the sheep, George would take the apple and the carrot and approach the big black horse slowly, cautiously, and talking to it gently and softly. The closest the horse would allow him to approach so far was about ten yards before it would whinny and back off. When the horse did that, George would place the apple and carrot on the ground and back slowly away, still talking quietly and softly. Anything to get the horse used to him. It seemed to be working. At least, that was what George thought.

While he watched the sheep, he would usually read books. Any mystery by Tony Hillerman was his usual fare, but lately he practiced the songs and prayers his grandfather had taught him because he wanted the coming of age ceremony perfect. He didn't want to disappoint his grandfather.

Secretly, he wanted to be like his grandfather who was a holy man, a *singer*, among the Navajo people, the *Dine'*, and who had the reputation of being similar to an archbishop or cardinal in the Roman Catholic religion. He knew this because many of his people converted to this faith, something neither he nor his family had done or would do. But his grandfather was that important. The *biligaana*, or white man, might refer to him as a Medicine Man, or in Navajo, a *Haatalii*, and they would not be wrong. The Navajo elders referred to him as *Hosten Tokay*, which was a term of respect. But his grandfather was that important. George wanted to learn the songs and had hoped to one day become a *singer* like his grandfather.

Spring in the desert was not nearly as hot or dry as the desert was in summer, but it was still hot and fairly dry just the same. Growing up in the desert and having never left the reservation, George knew how to take care of himself. Plenty of shade, plenty of water, a beat up straw cowboy hat that was a gift from his mother to shield his face. He seldom wore a shirt, but instead wore a leather vest, a pair of jeans, and his cowboy boots, though he always brought his moccasins with him. And when all of that failed, there was a stream over the rise and down in the valley that cooled him off if it had recently rained or if there had been snow up in the mountains and on the mesas and if the runoff had made it down that far.

George liked his life, though he knew no other way of living. And he loved his family, especially his grandfather. He had never really known his father who used to come around every so often, and then leave for great stretches of time. But ever since the birth of his sister, the youngest member of his family, he had left and hadn't returned, and no one seemed to think that he would. George didn't mind or care about his father, but did worry if his mother was happy. To him, she seemed to be, though she would never complain if she wasn't happy.

At school, George excelled in and loved history and science, and was only fair in math and English grammar. He loved the reading, just didn't do well with the grammar. By nature, he was quiet and would rather observe, so he typically listened to his classmates and the teacher, though he would ask questions if he didn't understand something and would answer questions if called upon. But generally, he preferred to listen and watch, and he was very good at listening and watching.

His dream, not that he had ever shared it with anyone- not even his grandfather- was to become a crime scene investigator and work for the Navajo Tribal Police, just like his cousin, Leonard. Perhaps in time, he would be able to join the FBI even though they didn't have a great reputation among the Navajo people, especially among the Navajo police with whom there seemed to be jurisdictional issues and conflicts. At least that was what his cousin said when he came to visit.

According to his cousin, crimes on the reservation consisted of drugs and alcohol related offenses, domestic conflicts, car theft, cattle rustling, and an occasional fight or two usually after someone drank too much. Sometimes there was a murder and his cousin said it was usually over drugs. Oxycontin, cocaine, and heroin were the drugs of choice on the rez, along with marijuana. Most everyone on the rez was poor. Money seemed to land in very few pockets other than into a big rancher's pocket who had a lot of land for cattle or sheep. Sometimes big money was made illegally by selling prescription narcotics, especially since legitimate jobs were scarce.

George's grandfather blamed the *biligaana*, white people, for that. But his grandfather told George and his brother that even though the *biligaana* were to blame, the *Dine'* still had a choice whether or not to take part in that. His grandfather would often say that there were two

coyotes living in each of us. One is good and the other is bad. Whichever one we feed is the one who lives. He would then turn to George and ask, ‘*Which coyote will you feed today?*’ And George would always answer the good coyote. His grandfather, still expressionless, would nod and that would be the end of the conversation.

George smiled as he pictured his grandfather looking off in the distance, no expression on his face. His grandfather would often tell him that a true Navajo would never betray one’s feelings by showing emotion.

Quietly, moving subtly and slowly, George checked his rifle, moving his finger onto the trigger lightly, though he was pretty certain he knew who it was.

“It took you long enough.”

“I knew you were there,” George said. “I could smell your hair.”

Rebecca Morning Star stepped out from among the pines and faced him, then looked out over the sheep.

George stood up next to her, waiting for her to say something. He had known Rebecca and her brother, Charles, since early elementary school. Their families were from different clans, Rebecca’s from the *To’ahani* or the Near The Water Clan, while George’s from the *‘Azee’tsoh dine’e* which translated to The Big Medicine People Clan. But their ranches were within three miles of each other and they went to the same school. Rebecca and George were both in fifth grade, while Charles was in sixth, and the three of them, along with George’s younger brother, William, hunted together, rode together, camped together, and when possible and if there was a need, helped each other with their chores.

Rebecca was a female mirror image of George. Bronze skin that turned dark brown in the desert summer sun. Both had a near noble look, he handsome, she pretty. Both were the

same height and on the skinny side. Both were athletic, although neither played on nor had time for organized sports. They were best friends and George had only recently begun wondering if Rebecca had liked him as more than just a friend.

“Do you ever get tired watching sheep?”

“No, not really,” George said, pushing his cowboy hat up off his brow.

She was silent for a bit, and then folded her arms across her chest and asked, “Do you think we’ll ever get off the rez?”

The first answer that came to George was that he doubted it, but he was also pretty sure that he didn’t really want to leave the rez. Where would he . . . they . . . go?

So he safely said, “I don’t know.”

Rebecca sat down on some rocks that had a shape of a chair, exactly where George had sat earlier.

“Do you have any jerky?”

“In the saddlebag. There’s water in the canteen if you’re thirsty.”

Rebecca dug around in the bag, took a small piece, and nibbled on it.

George sat down on the desert sand next to her and offered her the canteen, but she shook her head.

From the corner of his eyes, he studied her. Her full lips, narrow nose, large dark eyes with long lashes, shiny long black hair. He knew she was smart. She could also ride a horse as well or better than most boys, and was a very good shot. Like George, she was quiet and watched, observed, and listened.

Her breasts, which for a fifth grader and compared to the other girls in his class, were large.

Even though she was in fifth grade, she looked and acted more mature than any of the other fifth grade girls. But as his mother would often say, things seemed to happen faster on the rez than they do elsewhere. From what he could tell as he dressed out in the locker room for physical education, even George had begun developing faster than many boys his age.

Rebecca stood up, so George did too. She dusted sand off of her legs, placed her hands on her hips and said, “Can I ask you a question?”

George nodded.

“We will officially be sixth graders in four weeks. Two days after that, you turn twelve.”

George said nothing, not knowing where this was headed.

“You’re so smart in school, but you’re so dumb in life.”

George’s mouth opened and he wanted to protest, but remained silent instead.

“Why is it you can’t figure out that I want you to kiss me? Is it just you who is that slow or are all boys from the Big Medicine Clan that slow?”

“I . . . I . . .” George said, not knowing what he should say.

Instead, Rebecca stepped over to him, pushed his hat off his head and onto the ground. She placed both arms around his neck and kissed him long, and deeply, and passionately, her mouth open, her tongue gentle on his. She held the kiss a long time, pulled back, and then did it again, this time softer and longer, her body pressing into his.

It took George by complete surprise, but he did manage to hold her gently around her waist. He had no choice but to kiss her back, cursing himself because he didn’t know if he was doing it correctly, having never kissed a girl before. He did feel a stirring that he had never felt before, and he liked that feeling. A lot.

She pulled back, stared at him, allowing George to see her- perhaps for the first time- and then started to walk away. George stared after her, not moving.

“When you figure it out, let me know,” Rebecca said with her back to him as she walked through the pines to her horse.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Fishers, Indiana

Brett had already won the long jump on only his second attempt with an 18'11", bettering his jump from the previous week of 17' 6", and he still had one attempt to go.

However, Brett wasn't even thinking about it. Instead, he was concentrating on the two hundred meter race. He and his three teammates got killed in the four by two hundred. While Brett and Austin Hemple and Brian Green were fast, their second leg runner, Mike Lowry, was the weakest of the four runners. Brett at least managed to keep pace with his anchor split from the previous week, but by the time Green handed off to him, he was already ten yards behind Grimes.

Brett went in search of Lowry, who had walked off by himself and found him stretching in the infield away from everyone.

"Mike, you okay?"

Lowry shrugged and kept his head down. "I suck!"

"Yeah, you suck, but you're still pretty fast," Brett teased.

Lowry looked up at him and said, "I'm the slowest one in the four by two."

"But you're still faster than anyone else who could fill that spot," he paused to let that sink in and then added, "Coach was pretty happy. You had a PR so you should be too."

"But we still lost."

"But as a team, we improved and got faster."

Lowry shrugged.

"So shake it off, okay? I need you at the one hundred meter mark to tell me how far Grimes is behind me."

Lowry got up and walked across the infield with Brett.

“Who says Grimes will be behind you?” Lowry asked.

Brett smiled and said, “You really do suck, Mike!” and gave him a shove for emphasis and both boys ended up laughing.

The lane assignments were the same as the one hundred meter, with Grimes in lane three and Brett in lane four, but because a turn was involved, Grimes was in his starting block behind Brett.

Before getting into his block, Brett bent over at the waist and, keeping his legs straight, touched his toes. Then he spread his legs and touched his nose to his right leg, then to his left. He mounted himself into his block, shook out first his right leg, set it, and then shook out his left, and then settled in to wait for the starter’s instructions.

“Runners to your marks.”

Brett was certain Grimes was already set, just as he was.

“Set.”

And Brett timed the starter just right once again and shot out of his block low and hard and fast. As they took the curve, Brett was ahead of everyone in lanes five through eight. He had a suspicion that Grimes was about even with him, and that proved to be correct.

At the fifty yard mark, Brett was ahead by at least four steps. He saw Lowry at the one hundred yard mark and heard him yell, “Three yards!”

At the one-fifty yard mark, he and Grimes were almost side by side, though Brett still kept a one or two step lead. But Grimes was big and strong and fast.

At the one hundred seventy-five yard mark, Brett had visions of a repeat of the one hundred meter race, because Grimes had pulled even.

Both boys were determined to win. Neither boy wanted to come in second, regardless of a PR time. Brett leaned into the finish and to any spectator, it looked as though it was a tie.

But once again, the clock told a different story.

CHAPTER TWELVE

White Cloud, Michigan

Both Pete and Summer were road weary. Three days, two different states, and dead bodies in each. And now a total of three dead bodies in three states. Three bodies of children, all boys.

Pete stood up from examining the brown-haired boy, looked into the trees, and then at the sky, hoping one scene or the other would erase the vision of the boy that lay on the ground dead before him. Summer had already turned her back and was on the phone to the National Center for Missing Children, following up the picture she had sent of the boy earlier. As she talked, she paced with one hand holding the cell and the other on her hip.

“Let me know when you have an ID, okay?” And then a second or so later, Summer said, “And any other information you can provide such as the day, month and year of the boy’s abduction, his age at the time of abduction, and the city and state of residence.” And still a beat or two later, Summer added, “You have my number. I’ll wait for your call. Thanks.”

She slipped the phone into the pocket of her black slacks and walked a short distance away, knowing Pete would follow.

“The ME said that the time of death was within twenty-four hours.”

“I heard him,” Summer said wearily.

“I think we need to reevaluate what we have and perhaps come up with a different theory.”

Summer didn’t even want to consider any other theory, but knew Pete was correct.

Pete didn’t do laptops or iPads or any other electronics except for his smart phone, so he pulled out the little notebook that seemed to live in his sport coat pocket. Chet and the other

members of Kiddie Corps had teased him by calling it “*The Pete Kelliher 2014*.” Pete opened it up and pushed the pages back to the first boy found in Nevada.

“Just to recap what we already know . . . Brian Mullaney from California, had dark hair and no brand on his ankle. Richard Clarke from Flagstaff, Arizona had blond hair and a brand on his left ankle. An upside-down cross. He was also whipped with a leather strap.”

He paused, looked at Summer. She was visibly pale, her hair was mussed up, and she had dark half-circles under both eyes.

“This kid is about the same age as the other two boys. This kid has brown hair. There are no whip marks and there is no brand. All three boys were found with their hands cuffed behind their backs. All three were found with two shots to the back of the head. We know that in the case of the first two boys, Mullaney and Clarke, a .38 was used and I’m willing to bet that a .38 was used on this boy. I’m also willing to bet that the bullets found in this boy will match the bullets taken from Mullaney and Clarke. And, I’m also willing to bet that just as in the case of both Mullaney and Clarke, this boy was sexually abused over a long period of time.”

“Looks like we have a serial. A pedophile.”

Pete bit the inside of this mouth before speaking.

“What?” Summer asked.

“Given the time frame of the other two boys, and then adding this boy, and factoring in the locations of all three boys, we’ve got to consider that there is something bigger going on. Something that might involve more than one pedophile. This isn’t random. It doesn’t feel random. It feels planned. It feels thought out. It feels organized. It feels deliberate.”

“So what are you suggesting?” Summer said.

Pete shook his head and sighed.

“I’m not sure yet, so I don’t want to hazard a guess. I certainly don’t want to put any theories out there yet. I want to find out more about this boy, and I want to factor in everything we know about Mullaney and Clarke. Then, I want to get Chet and his computer revved up. Before we say or do anything . . . before we bring this to the whole group, we have to think this through. You and me first.”

And then as he turned his back on her and looked once more at the ME kneeling over the dead boy, ran a hand over his mostly gray flattop and muttered, “Fuck me!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
Fishers, Indiana

Just like he did after each race, Brett ran some extra yards, jogged even more, then turned and walked back to the finish line. Once again, Grimes was already there, but was down on one knee, his face contorted into a grimace. Brett's sprint coach, Robbie Coleman, stood talking to the race official and scribbled something on his finals tally sheet on the clipboard.

Brett stood next to him and peered at the sheet.

"Another PR, Brett. You ran a 21.54. You took 2.29 seconds off your time. Dang, Brett, you were flying!"

"Did I win or lose?"

"You won by two thousandths of a second."

Brett beamed, pumped a fist in the air, and shouted, "Yes!"

Grimes had gotten to his feet, but was bent over at the waist with his hands on his hips. He straightened up with his hands on the top of his head, gulping in air.

"Nice race, Da'Shawn," Brett said patting him on the back.

Grimes, being a head taller, slung an arm across Brett's shoulders, and said, "Shit, McGovern. I never had to run as hard as I did today. Damn, Dude!"

Brett laughed, gave him a shove, and they both laughed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
Fishers, Indiana

He stood for the entire track meet and perhaps more than anyone else, was relieved that Brett had won the two-hundred meter. Still, it was too close.

However, he didn't like the fact that Brett was so friendly with the other boy, his opponent. He didn't like it all.

He so enjoyed it when Brett used the front of his jersey to wipe off his face. He could see Brett's stomach, his muscles. He liked looking at Brett's face, his smile, and his chestnut-colored eyes. He liked watching Brett flex his arm muscles and his leg muscles when he ran.

He must have taken thirty or forty pictures of Brett. He'd have to cull and pick the ones that were truly worthy of showing who Brett was, because only those that were truly worthy would make it into his gallery. He might even share one or two with Brett and his parents. It was unfortunate Brett's parents were such simpletons, such nobodies who didn't truly appreciate Brett, who could never truly appreciate Brett. Certainly not like he could.

Now, what to do with the boy that beat Brett? What should he do about Grimes?