

Time Control

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**Pike Gillette
Time Travel Book 1**

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Prologue

“Slow down,” Pike said. “You’re *where*?”

Pike was having trouble understanding Hannamaker on the phone. They were at the movies, he and Jocelyn, who he was just starting to get to know, but that was another story.

Jack Hannamaker sounded upset, and he’d called three times real quick, which was why Pike finally answered, right there in the theater. They were watching the one about the guy who started McDonald’s. It wouldn’t have been Pike’s first choice, he was much more in the mood for a comedy after all that had gone down this week, but Jocelyn said it got good reviews, and now that they were in the middle of it, it wasn’t bad.

Some guy behind them was clearing his throat, as though to tell Pike to knock it off, which was understandable, and Pike told Jocelyn he’d be right back, to let him know what he missed, and he hustled out into the lobby.

“Okay now, let’s try it again,” he said to Hannamaker.

“Dude, I’m telling you,” Jack said, “you need to help me out here . . .”

“Jeez, if I have to,” Pike said. “Give me about an hour and half though. We’re busy at the moment.”

“This can’t wait . . . I’m pinned, this is no joke . . . I got a guy rattling the door.”

Pike had to admit, there was some noise in the background, and maybe someone yelling as well.

“What the *heck*,” he said.

“I’m on Willowside,” Jack said, “Not sure of the cross street . . . a couple blocks past that taco truck . . . toward Uffington . . .”

“So you mean *east* of the taco stand?”

“Whatever, you’ll see my car! . . . Come on man . . . I’m not believing this, I gotta hold the door now . . . this maniac’s trying to break it down!”

Hannamaker did sound scared. Pike hated to interrupt a routine, much less a date, but he figured he better get over there. He went back in the theater and told Jocelyn there was an emergency, and here was twenty bucks for an Uber if he didn’t make it back in time. The guy behind them started clearing his throat again, but Pike couldn’t worry about that and he kissed Jocelyn, which he hadn’t gotten used to yet, and he hightailed it out of there.

Jack’s vehicle was easy to find because it stood out. A ‘74 Ford Bronco that he’d picked up for \$200 off CraigsList and then fixed up. Not exactly restored though, and Pike didn’t trust the thing on the freeway and he was pretty sure Jack didn’t either though he made it sound like you could hop in and drive to New York, no problem.

But it did the job around town, and it was loud, which Jack liked, plus it pre-dated all the smog-check BS that most cars had to go through.

Of course Pike had only known about Jack's Bronco for a few days. This was one more quirk of time travel. For the couple years Pike knew the guy, up to when he went to Chico to try to straighten out the Milburns, Jack drove a Honda.

Whatever. Jack was right of course, the Bronco was easy to spot, especially with the weird red body and white roof combination. Pike parked and got out.

Chapter 0

Hillsdale, New Mexico

February 12th, 1956

Four-year-old Lucy Pitts held her dad Henry's hand as they walked around in her grandpa's empty old house.

There was no one left in the tiny, dusty town anymore. The mine had abruptly shut down when the Korean War ended, and everyone moved on, except for her grandpa, and a couple others who didn't last long, and pretty soon it was just him.

He was stubborn, her dad said, but now he had passed away.

Henry was deciding what, if anything, to do with his stuff. Not much worth saving in the house, that was for sure. He told Lucy they might as well see what was in the blacksmith shop in back.

The shop was across the yard in an old cedar barn with a weathervane on top. It was nearly dark out. Lucy would remember how thick the air felt, like something was pressing down on you, even though there was no wind at all.

There was a high-pitched hum and they looked to the left toward the base of the mountain. Something round and silver and large, wider than her grandpa's house, was floating slowly toward the ground. But then when it was about as high as a telephone pole it stopped in the air and started spinning.

There was a grinding sound and some brown stuff shot out from the bottom in a puff, and then the big round silver thing started to rise. After a minute, it moved very fast, faster than anything Lucy had seen, and it disappeared into the clouds.

Henry stood still, looking up into the sky for a long time. Finally he took his pipe out of his coat pocket and began packing it with tobacco.

He told Lucy that what they saw just then, it was real but it wasn't. He said it would be their secret, and nobody else's.

He picked Lucy up and held her tight, and he didn't put her down until they'd closed up the house and were getting back in the car.

Lucy felt safe. She loved having a special secret with her dad that no one could ever take away.

Chapter 1

Beacon, California

September 9th, 2016

It worked differently for different people, Pike would learn, but for him it happened during a high school football game.

It was a warm Friday night in the central valley, and Hamilton was taking on Bellmeade in the first league game of the season. With about eight minutes left in the first half, Bellmeade ran a guy wide and he cut back, and Pike Gillette came up and made the tackle and the guy didn't get up.

There was a time-out and they attended to the player, and after a few minutes he limped off. Pike had stuck his shoulder in there and wrapped up like he always tried to do, but something felt different.

In the third quarter Bellmeade completed a pass and then the receiver fumbled, but a big Bellmeade lineman picked it up and started rumbling downfield. Marty Clarke, pretty big himself and probably Hamilton's best player, tried to put a hit on the lineman but he bounced off. Pike then met the guy around the 35-yard line and there was a collision that resonated into the stands.

The big lineman snapped backwards like a rag doll and everyone on both teams kind of just stood there. The guy looked out cold.

A trainer brought out old-fashioned smelling salts, and the guy woke up, but he didn't know where he was when they asked him some questions, so they didn't let him move, and EMS showed up with their siren blasting and they took the guy to Rickhart Memorial, the next town over.

The whole thing took about 45 minutes and finally the game resumed, all the players (and the fans too) kind of shook up and tentative.

Hamilton went on to win, and in the locker room Coach Geddes gave Pike the game ball. "Those two plays," he said, "we fed off 'em. You never like to see anybody get hurt out there, but that's the way it's done, boys."

Pike didn't say anything and he put the ball in his locker and showered and got out of there. Something was off, scary weird. He was an average player, never a hard hitter or great tackler, in the lineup now his senior year at free safety only because they didn't have anyone better. He weighed 165 pounds dripping wet, and he had no business knocking two guys out of the game, and hospitalizing one of them.

Something was way THE HECK wrong.

Cathy said, "Are you hungry? That was some game."

"I'm starved," Pike said. "Like you wouldn't believe . . . What were you thinking?"

"In-N-Out's fine," she said. "I know that's where you want to go."

"Okay let's make it quick then," Pike said. "I'm thinking I want to try to stop off and see that kid."

"That's sweet of you," Cathy said, and she slid next to him in the pick-up and put her head on his shoulder as they drove to the burger place, which was out near the Interstate, 12 miles away, but there was nothing open late in town that was any good so you did what you had to do.

Pike wolfed down a double cheeseburger and an animal fries like it was a bite-sized appetizer, so he ordered another.

Cathy said, "My, we're hungry tonight . . . Which I can understand."

Pike said, "You mean because it was a hard game? Or I'm nervous about how that guy is?"

"Well, yeah, both those things . . . Something else. Did you know tomorrow's our three-month anniversary of going out?"

"No," Pike said. He liked Cathy a lot. They got together over the summer, at Dirk Riebli's party, it sort of happened while they were playing Marco Polo in the pool. He wasn't great with times and dates, but three months sounded about right.

"I felt different out there tonight," he said.

"I know. You were amazing."

He started to say more, wanting to tell her you don't understand, there was something going on, there may still be, but he decided to leave it alone.

The kid, named Anthony DiVincenzo, had checked out okay in the emergency room, but they wanted to keep him overnight for observation so they admitted him.

The nurse informed Pike that visiting hours were over. Pike said he'd make it quick and she shrugged her shoulders and told him the patient was in 119.

Anthony's parents were in the room, and Pike introduced Cathy and himself. The dad was huge and a spitting image of the kid, though the mom was tiny.

The dad said he appreciated them coming, though it was obvious he didn't. The kid was sitting up, sipping something through a straw. He had one of those soft neck braces on.

"Just so you know . . .," Pike started to say.

The kid waved his hand. "Don't worry about it," he said. "You got me fair and square. I'll pay you back next time." His voice was thin.

Which was a relief, the kid taking it well. Except Pike was pretty darn sure there's not going to be a next time, that football wasn't worth it if this is what happens.

Cathy was talking to the mom and they laughed about something, and Pike didn't know what else to really say to the guy. He asked how the season had been going so far, and does the kid play basketball or baseball too. The kid said he didn't, but he wrestled.

There was some noise at the door and someone bounded energetically into the room. It was the Bellmeade coach, smiling and carrying a box of candy under his arm.

He spent a minute with Anthony and then said to Pike, "You're 22 unh? That was some hit, son."

Pike said, "Sorry."

"Are you kidding?" the coach said. "You can play on my team any day. You came flying up in there like a brick shithouse."

"Yeah, well," Pike said

"We watched film on you guys," the coach said. "Didn't see nothing like that out of you. Where you been storing it?"

The coach winked and punched him on the shoulder, and Pike and Cathy said goodbye all around. Pike realized he was still hungry and wondered if the hospital had some kind of cafeteria that stayed open, but he let it go.

Cathy asked did he want to go back to her house for a while, as her parents were out playing bridge, and those things tended to run late. Pike said that sounded great, except that he was shot.

He kissed her goodnight and watched her go inside, and he went home and slept 12 hours, which normally would have been great, except for he was tossing and turning the whole damn time.

Chapter 2

Pike showered and came downstairs and his sister Jackie and little brother Bo were sitting in the kitchen eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. His mom Alice was doing dishes.

“Where’s dad?” Pike said.

“He’s been waiting for you to wake up,” his mom said.

“Always easier to sleep than work,” Jackie said.

“You did good last night,” Bo said. “That one guy, he went ka-boom!”

Pike reached down and messed up Bo’s hair. “How about you get me some Wheaties then,” Bo said, “so I can stall longer before I have to help Dad.”

He had two bowls of cereal and added a peanut butter and jelly for good measure, and went out back to see what his dad was up to.

There’d been a leak in an underground pipe, which Pike’s dad had to break up part of the walkway to repair. Now he’d prepped the area and was mixing cement to finish off the job.

“Hiya PK,” Bill, the dad said. “Nice of you to join us . . . Bring me that bag, if it isn’t too much trouble.” His dad was smiling. He was an easygoing parent, didn’t put much pressure on Pike or Jackie or Bo, didn’t attend any of Pike’s games unless Pike asked him to, which he hadn’t last night.

“Sure, piece of cake,” Pike said. It was a sack of dry cement mix. He tried to reach underneath it but the bag was leaning against the garden shed and he couldn’t get his hand around it. So he pulled on the top to free it up so he could grab it.

As he pulled, realizing with alarm that he was holding the top of the bag with just his thumb and index finger, the bag came off the ground.

Pike dropped it and eyeballed the label and it looked as big as a movie screen.

QUICKRETE 90-lb Gray High Strength Concrete Mix

“What’s the problem over there?” Bill said. “We gotta work relatively quickly here, in case you were wondering.”

Pike picked up the bag the normal way and brought it to his dad and dumped it into a mixing trough that his dad was squirting the hose into. He went back over to the shed and looked in.

There were four more 90-pound sacks of the dry cement. Pike stepped inside and closed the door. He grabbed two of the bags, one on his left, one on his right, using the same two-finger grip, the very tips of his fingers being all that were making contact with the heavy paper material.

He pulled upwards.

Both bags came off the ground. He continued slowly raising his hands until they were at eye level, and then hoisted them all the way up over his head like he was signalling a touchdown.

It happened as easily and effortlessly as though the bags were empty.

Pike put the bags down and stood there, hyperventilating, sweating, not from any exertion but from the fear of what was happening to him, or already had.

He stepped out of the shed and told his dad he’d be back in a minute. He went up to his room, took off his shirt and looked in the mirror. Everything seemed the same. If he looked at himself sideways and tightened his arms, his biceps may have been bigger by a fraction, compared to maybe six months ago, but he was pretty sure that was from summer weight training.

Pike had a boxing workout bag hanging in the corner of his room. It was called a heavy bag, was filled with sand, one of those upright type deals that resembled an opponent. You put on padded gloves to hit the it because there was almost no give.

“God *damn* it,” Pike said, as he punched the bag with his bare hand, a short right-hand blow delivered from the shoulder. He pulled his hand away and there was a fist-sized indent in the bag, and the vinyl exterior had torn open and sand was spilling out.

There was a little trickle of blood across his knuckles. *So my skin, it’s normal, or what?*

But there was very little pain, on his skin or anywhere inside his hand, and something told Pike he could have just driven his fist through a brick wall and he wouldn’t have felt much then either.

Chapter 3

Pike and Cathy went to the mall on Sunday and stopped at the movies on the way back. The movie was about an adopted guy from Arkansas who spends years trying to track down his original parents. It was supposed to be a real feel-good movie, and Cathy was crying at the end.

“What?” Pike said, as they were getting up.

“Their bond,” Cathy said, “it was so strong it survived everything they went through.”

“Were they that bad off though,” Pike said, “if they’d never connected?”

They were in the lobby of the theater. Cathy held Pike’s hand and looked around. “Did you know I’m adopted?” she said softly.

“Jeez . . . no . . . No way.”

“It’s a secret. Please don’t tell anyone . . . You’re the first person that knows, outside of my family.”

Pike was pretty floored.

First that she was adopted, especially considering she looked an awful lot like her mom.

But second, that she confided this to him. Above anyone else apparently.

He didn’t say anything until they were in the car.

“Not even any girlfriends?” he said.

“Nope . . . It never seemed natural, to tell anyone . . . Or necessary.”

“So . . . it was necessary to tell *me*?”

“I *wanted* to tell you,” she said. “I’m glad I did.”

“Well, I’m not sure what to say.”

“You don’t have to . . . Wow, what’s wrong with me? I’m sorry if I threw that all in your lap just now. You didn’t ask me to.”

“Nah, that’s fine,” Pike said. “Listen, I’ve got something to tell you too . . . Maybe.”

“Gosh,” Cathy said. “Now I’m scared. That it’s about us.”

“It’s not. There’s something else going on. I’m not sure if you need to know . . . or if knowing could screw anything up . . . I think it probably would.”

“Ohhh-kaaay,” Cathy said. “A mystery man then . . . *I’m* taking a chance asking *you* this, but Pike . . . have you been this close to anyone before? I mean a girl?”

“I haven’t,” Pike lied, and he put his arm around her. He thought he was in love with Becky Ottinger sophomore year. Her family moved away that summer. He still missed her.

But Cathy was looking up at him and he knew she wasn’t thinking about anything else, or anyone else, and at this moment he was proud to be with her, and deep down he knew he was very lucky.

“Give me a little time,” he said. “Let me think it through.”

“If I told you I’m here for you, what that mean anything?”

“Not sure.”

“Because I am,” she said.

Chapter 4

Pocatello, Idaho

May 26th, 2016

Dani Andriessen waved to the parent as she made sure the last child was safely picked up, and she went into the teacher lounge.

Two weeks to go, and her first full year as a kindergarten teacher would be over. She loved it on the one hand, but there were all kinds of pressures, regulations, curriculums you had to follow. They were a major distraction, and she could see how over time they could beat you down. For her it was all about witnessing the children's little joys and discoveries, and she hoped she could keep it that way.

Dani was done for the day except for a prep period which was optional. What she didn't want to do was go home.

Last night had been an ugly scene. She regretted it, but she knew it had to happen sooner or later.

Marcus had been drinking, but what else was new? He'd been out with his friends from ISU, the same stupid friends he had going back to the freshmen dorms, and now they'd all either graduated or dropped out but either way were in the adult rat-race now, working one job or another around town.

Couldn't you just grow up and move on from that crowd?

But no, they have their place over on 5th Street, the brewpub by the railroad tracks that someone converted from an old brick warehouse, and Marcus would come home with a buzz on, and now and then would be blitzed out of his friggin mind.

Like last night.

It was 7:30 and he came storming in and wanted to get romantic right away. Dani was on the couch with her knees folded up under her, making notes for tomorrow's class.

"C'mon Babe," Marcus said. He was smiling but it was a sneer-smile, and his eyes were narrow.

“Sorry,” Dani said, “but your manner, the whole situation, you just took all the spark out of it, to be honest.”

“Is that right . . . You know something?” He was holding onto her shoulder.

“Okay please hon,” she said. “Why don’t you take a shower, and I’ll fix you something to eat. Things’ll look rosier tomorrow.”

Marcus started laughing. “Too far off,” he said. “Truth of the matter, you look pretty rosy right now.”

He pushed her sideways and she was on her back on the couch and her laptop went skittering to the floor. He grabbed both shoulders, and began lowering his face toward hers.

She could smell his alcohol breath, stale, with a hint of garlic.

With her left hand, Dani let go a little backhand slap like she was flicking a crumb off a table.

She caught Marcus across the bridge of the nose and she could see his eyes roll up and he hung suspended there for a moment, and then collapsed to the floor with an alarmingly loud thud.

Dani’s first thought was *I killed him, didn’t I?* Her mind was racing. *How on earth do I explain it. Should I call a lawyer right now. Should I get in the car and start driving and never look back.*

Marcus began to groan, very softly, but at least he was making noise, *thank God*. After a few minutes he started to move his arms a little.

Dani helped him sit up against the couch. “Would some water help?” she said.

Marcus was rubbing one eye now like he was waking up first thing in the morning. “What the heck just happened?” he said.

This might be okay after all. “Hon,” she said, “you had too much to drink and you fell off the couch.”

“Oh.”

Dani went in the kitchen and got him some ice for his nose. She said, “So please don’t do that again . . . Okay?”

“Say what now?” Marcus said.

He was slurring his words, probably from all the alcohol rocking around. But Dani realized with concern, but with some satisfaction too, that he may very well be dealing with a concussion.

“Don’t fall off things and get hurt anymore, is what I’m saying,” she said. “The easiest way to prevent that, is lose your idiot friends and come home after work.”

“Ah . . . now I see where you’re going,” he said, standing up shaky and working his way over to the recliner and turning on the TV.

“So please . . .?” she said.

“Damn straight,” he said, turning up the volume loud, locked in on something with people shooting at each other. “In fact next time I’ll shove it up your tight little entitled rear end.” He let out a hoot.

Dani got her jacket and went for a walk. Marcus was deep down an okay guy, she was convinced, except for the drinking part. He put her first, and they laughed a lot and had fun together. If only the day ended at 5 o’clock.

That said . . . *In a perfect world, I wonder if I would have the guts to put my hand on his neck . . . and squeeze . . . There would be some crackling sounds, probably . . .* Picturing it . . . *But that would take care of it, wouldn’t it?*

She passed Hank’s Henny-Penny coffee shop on Centre Street. A man and woman were sitting in a front booth, looking to be in serious conversation. The man reached across the table and took the woman’s hand, and she let him do it, but there was an element of caution there.

Dani was embarrassed now, that she’d considered, even hypothetically, doing something crazy like that to Marcus. The positive from tonight, if there could be one, was luckily she hadn’t revealed her strength. She knew she needed to keep it that way.

It had been close to a year. The date was June 30th, 2015. she wouldn’t be able to forget it. She had finished her student teaching and gotten her Master’s in May, and now it was a question of scrambling over the summer to land a job.

She was taking lifeguard shifts at the pool at the student rec center to make a few extra dollars. Meanwhile her friend Kaila kept talking about these spin classes she was taking, how the positive endorphins gave you a natural high and lasted for hours after.

So one evening after her shift, specifically on that last day of June, a Tuesday, Dani looked in on one that was taking place in a side room next to the main basketball court. The class was going full throttle, a fit-looking guy with long hair and a backwards baseball cap was up front, directing things through a little microphone that was pinned to his t-shirt.

He saw Dani standing there and took a hand off his handlebars and smiled and waved for her to try it. She found a bike, adjusted the seat as best she could and started in. There was

music with an insistent beat, and three big-screen TVs spaced around the room that all had someone bicycling a scenic course that looked like it was in the Alps.

It felt pretty easy, honestly, so Dani turned the knob that upped the intensity level but nothing really changed. She took a look around, and people were sweating heavily and some were gritting their teeth and struggling. Of course they'd been there longer, she'd just showed up 10 minutes ago.

The director up front yelled for everyone to push it, *blast* was the word he used, that it was 600 yards to the summit and who would be first?

Dani reacted to his command and got her legs really churning now, she was pretty sure they were going faster, in fact much faster, than anyone in the class. There wasn't much to it, maybe a tad more effort than when she was warming up, but still a piece of cake.

Someone behind her yelled out, "Ho-ly Mackerel!"

The girl to Dani's left slowed up and said something that was drowned out by the music. Dani swung her head around, scared that heaven forbid somebody was having a medical problem. As she turned, the smoke coming off her front wheel got up into her face.

She immediately stopped pedalling, and then there was the smell, like the burnt rubber she remembered as a little girl from her dad's clutch car, the Plymouth, with the stick shift up by the steering wheel.

The guy in charge told everyone to take five, and he got off his bike and stopped the music.

Dani felt like the center of attention in the worst way, like she'd gotten her period for the first time in public.

The director came back to her and made a joke, that she wasn't supposed to take him quite that seriously when he'd told them to crank it to the summit. Meanwhile he checked out her bike, told her these things sometimes act up, and if she didn't mind, to finish it off on a different one.

The guy'd played it like it was no big deal, but at the same time he seemed shocked by what had just happened. Though maybe that was just her, projecting.

Dani got on another bike and pedaled very gently, and the spin class ended.

When everyone left, she went back in the room, which was all dark now, and picked a bike at random and started pedalling again, first normally, then a little faster . . . Then pushing it.

Pretty quickly the smoke came billowing up, and she felt herself gagging, not so much from the smoke itself but from the massive, stunning uneasiness that was pulsating through her entire body.

Walking like a confused zombie out of that spin room, she wondered, *What in God's name was going on here?*

Now, back in her little teacher's cubicle after school, nearly a year later, she didn't have any answers.

All she knew was, there were plenty of hours left in the day, and she prayed there wouldn't be another scene with Marcus like last night, but unfortunately one never knew.

Chapter 5

At the start of practice on Monday, before the official whistle blew, Pike was throwing the ball around with Marty Clarke.

“Dang, dude, your arm got better,” Clarke said.

Pike always had trouble throwing a football very well. The ball never came out of his hand right and it didn’t go where he wanted it to. The whole thing without much zip.

Now it felt effortless. Cocking the hand behind the ear and casually flicking it forward, and the ball rocketing out of there with a razor tight spiral and hitting Clarke 15 yards away right on the numbers.

Coach Geddes saw what was going on and came over. “Hey now, let’s try something,” he said.

He had Amos Stillman line up on the hash mark at the 40. Stillman was their best receiver. Coach had him run down-and-outs, slants and post patterns, while Pike dropped back from an imaginary center and threw to him.

Pike was completing everything, all over the field. After about a dozen throws he realized the whole team was watching now. There were a few oohs and ahs at first, and then everyone started getting pretty quiet, like *what the hell was going on here*.

Pike decided he better miss a few, and let one flutter off his hands and threw another short.

Coach blew the whistle and everyone began their drills, and that was that.

As he was leaving the gym after practice, Coach grabbed him and said, “See you a minute in the office?”

Coach wore an old fashioned grey sweatshirt to practice with a whistle and stopwatch around his neck. He had a big gut, and Pike pictured him eating ice cream out of the container watching TV.

“Gonna give you reps this week,” Coach said. “Quarterback position’s been shaky as you know . . . You good with that?”

Pike had always wanted to play quarterback and said he was.

“Seen a lot of positive changes in you son. Just this week.” Coach gave him a long look, direct, and Pike had a terrible realization that *not sure how, but he knows*.

But Coach said, “Course I’ve seen it occur. Kids like you, suddenly they become men their senior year. It can happen overnight.”

“I don’t feel any different than the Bishop game, honestly,” Pike lied.

“I hear ya. You’ve always had talent. Just good to see it coming together at the right time.” Coach turned off the light and locked the office. “Get your rest, son. Opportunity like this, comes around once. You kids have no clue, but next fall, when you’re out in the world, it’s all been yanked away. Just like that.”

He snapped his fingers, stared at Pike hard again for a second, and left the gym.

Chapter 6

Wednesday night Pike's mom asked if he would go to CVS and pick up some pictures that she had developed. He couldn't understand why she still did it the old-fashioned way, instead of using the computer, but he didn't mind going.

Pike avoided stores like CVS but once he was there he liked browsing the aisles. They did have some good deals, if you actually needed the stuff, which he guessed most people didn't.

He was looking at the shaving section when there was some commotion up front. An older woman was yelling in a high pitch and a manager came running out of a glassed in cubicle. Pike saw a flash of someone in a brown jacket racing out the door.

"Stop him!" the manager yelled out into the parking lot.

Pike ran out there past the manager and saw the brown-jacket guy getting into a beat-up Honda and trying to floor it out of the parking lot. The guy obviously wanted to turn onto Jamison Parkway and get lost from there, but there was one car in front of him, waiting to turn first.

Pike got between the two cars and without thinking about it, just sort of instinctively reached down under the brown jacket guy's bumper and lifted the front of the vehicle a couple inches off the ground.

The guy put it in reverse and revved the engine but nothing happened. He opened the door and yelled at Pike and shook his fist. Finally he got out of the car and charged him. Pike let the car down and turned and met the guy.

Pike let him get close and then slapped a bear hug on him. He heard a couple of ribs cracking and the guy doubled over and and crumpled to the ground.

"That was amazing, thank you so much," the manager said as they waited for the police. "What'd you do exactly? With the front of the man's vehicle?"

Pike prayed the no one had gotten a good look at him hoisting it up. "All's I did," he said, "I stood there. Was pretty sure he wouldn't run me over." He tried to laugh but it didn't really come out right.

“Well that was resourceful of you,” the manager said. “Because it worked. But it took some moxie.”

“Yeah, well, I guess I just reacted,” Pike said.

The two policeman who showed up weren't in the mood to ask too many questions, luckily, as they knew the brown jacket guy and had trouble with him before. They took Pike's name but that was about it.

Word got around though and a few hours later some stuff ended up on Facebook, and by the next day at school it was a topic. Mr. McMillan in History asked him to stand up and talk about his heroics. Pike left out the whole in-front-of-the-car part and downplayed the rest of it, saying simply that the guy ran right into him and all he did was wrap him up, same as most anyone else would have done, at least anyone who played some football.

After lunch, when he stopped at his locker Pike got visited by a few girls who were apparently impressed and wanted to know more. He had to admit, he enjoyed the attention, though in the middle of it he saw Cathy down the hall, pretending not to, but looking in his direction.

Chapter 7

Friday night Hamilton travelled to play Starling over in Oxman.

What the deal was, according to Coach Geddes in an announcement on the bus that went too long and had guys getting restless and squirming around, was Foxe would start at QB like normal and then depending how it went, Pike might come in.

It didn't take long. Starling had a running back who'd jumped onto the radar of college recruiters, and he took the opening kickoff back all the way and added a 45-yard touchdown run, almost before everyone was in their seats.

If Pike was back in there on defense the result might have been different, but Coach had a policy of his quarterbacks only playing offense, to keep them fresh and focused, and Pike was cool with that, and in way relieved that he wouldn't be hurting another guy.

Meanwhile, Hamilton couldn't move the ball. Coach told Pike to get ready, and he started throwing to Biff Watson behind the bench, lobbing it over there easy at first, and then starting to let it fly. He signaled to Watson that was enough, and he told Coach he was ready, and next series Coach stuck him in.

The ball started doing what he told it. It was kind of magic (not *kind* of, actually. It *was* magic).

Receivers were dropping a few passes, probably because everything was coming in like a bullet, but Pike thinking *that's not the worst thing, let's don't be too perfect here.*

The Starling running back scored once more, but by the middle of the 4th quarter Pike had put up 466 yards and 6 touchdowns, and Coach took him out and had Foxe run the ball the rest of the way to kill the clock, and that was it.

On the bus ride home Coach gave his little speech, how it was a great team effort, and the defense stepped up and controlled their main guy, and we need to enjoy this for a couple hours, but then to get re-focused on our next opponent, which was Clarion Central.

Nothing about Pike's performance. But when they got off the bus back at school he took him aside and smiled and said, "I seen you were a little nervous out there, even after you got it going."

Pike said, "I was."

“Keep being nervous,” Coach said, and walked off.

Pike didn’t expect it, but Cathy was waiting for him in the parking lot. She’d driven to the game with her friend Gina, but Pike had been so wrapped up in his new quarterback duties that he’d been oblivious and hadn’t noticed her in the stands.

“What?” he said. “Why’re you looking at me like that?”

“I’m happy for you, but I’m kinda concerned,” Cathy said.

“The heck you talking about?”

“All these things now,” she said. “I think you know exactly what I mean.”

“Okay hold on,” Pike said. “Stopping that purse snatcher guy, that was a fluke . . . The game, that probably was too, if you want to know the truth.”

“Well you’re the big man on campus suddenly,” she said. Her voice cracked, and Pike could see she was tearing up just a little.

He put his hands in his pockets and shuffled his feet around.

He had always heard that life boiled down to a few specific moments, and this may be one of them.

“If I told you something,” he said, “that makes absolutely no sense . . . that no one in their right mind would believe . . . what would you do?”

“Gosh . . . You mean . . . would I break up with you or something?”

“For starters, would you think I’m crazy? And would you tell anyone else?”

Cathy put her arms around his waist and dropped her head against his chest. “No . . . And no,” she said.

Pike held her tight and said, “I believe you. Let’s take a drive.”

They took the old two-lane to Walker Road and turned off and parked. Pike said, “You keep going, a mile or two, it’s some guy’s ranch now, but did you know that used to be a drive-in movie?”

“Yes, I’ve heard that,” Cathy said. “My parents used to go.”

“So did mine. Sounds like everyone sat there in a big parking lot and you hooked a speaker over your window. Otherwise you couldn’t hear.”

“You’d think they could have engineered something better, maybe have it play through your radio.”

“Yeah, you’d think . . . On my deal . . . Sweetie, my body has changed . . . Something REAL weird.”

She was rubbing the back of his neck, playful. “Oh yeah?” she said. “You could have fooled me.”

“Why do you joke around? What if I had a terminal disease?”

“Because I know you don’t,” she said, massaging his shoulders now. “You’re the picture of health . . . Gina says so too . . . which is what I’m worried about. That too many other girls may be thinking the same thing.”

“Forget all that,” Pike said. “What it is . . . I can’t.”

“It’s fine. Please don’t tell me, if you’re not comfortable.”

“No, no . . . all right . . . here goes nothing . . .” He took a deep breath and exhaled and closed his eyes for a moment. “I got a lot stronger, is what’s happened . . . I’m talking super strong . . . like something out of a cartoon.”

Nodding at her.

“Cathy . . . I didn’t just tackle that doofus at CVS . . . I lifted up the front of his CAR.”

Cathy’s eyes were big, and she was silent.

“Putting that kid Anthony in the hospital?” Pike continued. “Okay, yeah, I thought it might have been a fluke . . . But then I tried some other stuff . . . kind of like an experiment.”

They sat there looking out the window. It was a clear night and the wind had picked up, and it had gotten chilly. They could hear the occasional hum of the Interstate in the distance.

Finally Cathy said, “Well couldn’t it just be, I don’t know, that your adrenaline has kicked in for whatever reason? . . . I’ve read about that kind of thing happening.”

“I wish,” Pike said. He opened the car door and stepped out and closed it. He squatted down and with the ease of a weightlifter warming up with a light weight, he hoisted the side of the car off the ground. Cathy slid against the far door.

Pike eased it down and got back inside.

“So . . .” he said. “I’m thinking . . . Are *you* going leave *me*? Now that I’m a freak.”

“Wow,” Cathy said.

“That’s it? Wow?”

She moved closer and closed her eyes and kissed him full on, letting her lips linger. In no hurry.

When they were sitting back she said, “So I told you my secret, you told me yours. What’s the big deal? Now we’re even.”

Pike didn’t think many people got married at 18, though maybe in the old days they did.

But at that moment, there were a lot worse ideas in the world than marrying Cathy right here in this car.

Chapter 8

Yonkers, New York

July 4th, 2016

Don Pascarella never liked the 4 to midnight shift on holidays. Shit tended to happen, usually minor, but the calls came flooding in and you were in and out of the squad car the whole time.

Last 4th of July, up on Primrose Avenue some guy got into it with his brother-in-law because the brother-in-law kept throwing firecrackers out the window, so he threw the *guy* out the window.

Two stories, but luckily the brother-in-law only broke his arm. Don and his partner got the guy cuffed and under control, but then the brother-in-law, as they're putting him in the ambulance, yells at the other idiot, "Now you know why Sal got whacked, you prick."

Don didn't want to know, and didn't add that part to his report.

The other thing about tonight, if he wanted to categorize it, this was 7 months to the day since it happened. December 4th.

He'd been down in the city Christmas shopping with Erline. They were looking in the department store windows on Fifth Avenue, the same ones as when he was a little kid. Times had changed, but not all that much when it came to Christmas. Lord and Taylor still had the classic miniature steam train circling around in the window, and a fresh generation of people were pointing and smiling.

He and Erline had been crossing Fifth at 37th Street, and some asshole cabbie comes barreling toward them in the outside lane. He may have been playing chicken with them, like cabbies did, but on the other hand maybe the guy was legitimately distracted, looking at his phone or whatever. Don didn't have a good feeling about it.

What he did was he grabbed Erline around the waist with his right arm, pinned her against his hip, and then kind of broad-jumped them both out of the crosswalk and onto the curb.

It didn't feel like much, but when he sized it up he'd jumped them about 10 feet . . . From essentially a standing start . . . About as effortlessly as stepping off the outside stoop of his favorite pizza joint on Odell Avenue.

There were the usual mid-town herds of people walking every which way, and cars honking, everything chaotic, and if anyone noticed what just happened they didn't say anything.

Except Erlene. She said, "My. That was some feat there." Her jaw having dropped open slightly and stayed that way.

Don explained that she was over-thinking it, not to mention exaggerating big-time, what just happened.

But she kept bringing it up, about every hour, the rest of the day.

Finally at Grand Central he got her an ice cream to take on the train, and by the time they were halfway back to Yonkers, the tranquility of the Hudson River on their left, he'd convinced her she was mixed up.

Or so he hoped. Luckily she never brought it up again, and that would have been the end of that.

Except this insane strength, it was FOR REAL, and as the weeks went on Don didn't know if he should celebrate or be scared to death.

Anyhow . . . tonight he was riding with Otto and their third call was the projects on Nepperhan. These weren't the extreme projects you had in parts of the Bronx, a few miles south, which the cops down there tried like hell to avoid.

The ones in Yonkers weren't as unpredictable. Most of the residents minded their own business and respected, and even welcomed the law. But no matter how you sugar-coated them, they were still the projects, and when you got out of the car you were on high alert.

Tonight kids were setting off stuff in the front courtyard, probably a fair amount of it illegal, and a couple kids waited for a reaction from Don and Otto. Don gave them a friendly wave and they got in the elevator.

Dispatch had it a 415F, which was typically a family dispute.

They knocked and announced themselves as police. A little guy opens the door, tells them he's glad they came, that his wife was getting physical with him.

Was. Don and Otto with the radar up now.

Otto starts asking the guy some questions and Don takes a cautious look around, and there's a woman lying on the kitchen floor, looking pretty damn DOA, a carving knife handle sticking up out of her chest.

"Over here," Don calls back to Otto, and the shotgun blast comes through the bedroom door and knocks Don back against the base of the sink, and Don sees his grandparents, and then he's in his third grade class on a warm spring day with the windows open, and then he's in an office somewhere trying to answer a question but no one is telling him what the question is.

Don was in intensive care for 9 and a half days, and then he expired. The doctor told Erline it was a miracle that he lasted that long, that he had no business even making it to the hospital, and she should be very proud of his fighting spirit.

When Don was near death on the last day, a man in a suit and tie who Erline had never seen before asked to speak to her in private.

He told her he was from a regionally-based organ procurement organization. Don's driver's license, he said, showed him as a potential organ donor, but he had never completed the updated process of registering in the New York State database.

Erline told the man it wasn't even a question, that Don would want his organs donated, and the man thanked her and gave her a form to sign, and said others would be so grateful.

Chapter 9

It was Saturday afternoon and Pike and Cathy were playing a little tennis.

Last night had been the Clarion Central game, and Pike continued his dominant play at quarterback. Hamilton won 42-10, and before they left the field Coach introduced him to a Mr. Jameson, who was scouting the game for Fresno State. Mr. Jameson said he was impressed with his ‘pocket presence’, in addition to his arm, and he gave Pike his card.

When the scout left, Coach told Pike not to get a big head. Pike had only heard ‘pocket presence’ on TV games and never thought about what it meant, though he supposed he had the idea. Either way, it wasn’t something he wanted to ask Coach about, and then have to stand there listening to a ten-minute answer.

Cathy was a pretty good tennis player, graceful, a natural athlete with fluid strokes. They took a break and sat on the beat-up bench between the courts and Pike told her he was impressed.

“You’re nice,” she said, “but I don’t compete well. In a real match, I fall apart.” She smiled and shook her head.

Pike was also impressed that Cathy didn’t take herself too seriously.

“So . . .,” he said. “You . . . been thinking any more . . . about my thing? My deal?”

Neither of them had brought it up since a week ago that evening when they’d driven out off Walker Road.

“I have,” Cathy said.

“Uh-oh, good or bad?” Pike said, and he got serious and held her hand and waited.

“I’ve been googling it,” she said, “pretty much to death, if you want to know the truth. Pike I can’t wrap my mind around it . . . There has to be some explanation.”

Pike said, “I know. Some logic behind it . . . Believe me, I’m with you . . . First few days, I’m online 5 hours a pop, looking. Give me one little friggin clue . . . Then everything I’m reading, all these dudes chiming in, I start worrying I’m dying . . . That I may be terminal or something . . . Or like those unlucky people with genetic shit, where they age 10 years for every 1 of ours . . . So I stopped trying to figure it out.”

“Well you’re not dying,” Cathy said, but the words came out a bit shaky.

“Sweetie anything’s possible.” Pike felt himself getting choked up, but fought not to let Cathy see it. “The only good thing,” he said, “you appreciate every day more . . . At least I think I am.”

Gina had a party at her house that night, and a lot of football guys were there, and after a while Gina’s mom and step-dad announced they were going out bowling and for everyone to please keep the party on an even keel.

As soon as they pulled out of the driveway, the booze came out, and some of the football guys were putting away too much too fast. Foxxe, the original quarterback, who Pike had replaced now, was one of them.

Foxxe started riding Pike, friendly at first, then not so friendly, then nasty. Making comments about his mother, and his sister. Foxxe clearly wanted to fight, and someone yelled *Right on, let’s take it outside!*

Pike followed Foxxe out there and he could see Cathy standing inside near the patio screen door, both hands over her mouth.

Pike swung first and Foxxe put up a forearm and blocked it, and he swung from down low and got Pike around the ribs, and Pike doubled over. Foxxe finished him off with right hand to the temple. Pike fell forward and stayed there for a while, rolling around, his face all scrunched up.

Someone brought him some ice and he struggled into a patio chair, and most everyone went back inside and some music started up.

There was a side gate off the back yard, and Pike and Cathy got out of there and drove downtown, or to what passed for a downtown, which amounted to three blocks full of stores and small businesses on Division Street.

“You’re okay,” Cathy said. “Right?”

Pike said, “I hate to say ‘unfortunately’, but yeah, I’m good.”

“You had to let him win, I get it.”

“What you’re saying,” Pike said, “I need to show I’m human?”

“Okay fine, I guess that’s what I mean . . . But he hit you hard. Didn’t you feel anything at all?”

“It hurt a little. Not the first one so much. When he hit me on the side of the head, I could feel a little something . . . Kind of like when you take your index finger, put it behind your thumb, and flick yourself with it.” Flicking himself in the cheek, demonstrating.

“Just your skin then?”

“Pretty much. Maybe I felt it inside my head just a tad . . . I’m not Superman, not that kind of freak . . . If that’s where you’re going, babe.”

“I wasn’t . . . I didn’t mean to imply that at all.”

They were at a stoplight. There was an uneasy silence.

Pike said, “I know you weren’t. That’s my fault . . . This is what I was afraid of . . . dumping all my garbage in your lap.”

Cathy didn’t respond to that. She was dialed in on something else. “All right, I’m just trying to throw things out there,” she said. “Did anything *happen*? Beforehand, that you can possibly think of? Was there, like, an incident at all?”

“Nah. I wish it was that simple. Like I said, the game. Tackling that first guy’s when the bullshit officially jumped onto the radar.”

“Okay let me stop you please . . . Just continuing that direction for a moment, why do you call it that?”

“BS?”

“Yes. Pike you’re powerful, maybe more than anyone else . . . And okay I’ll go ahead and say it. You’re a strong . . . sexy . . . hunk of a guy . . . You can help people. Which you already did, the lady at CVS with her purse snatching.”

“I know, it sounds awesome on the surface . . . But being *different* . . . when you can’t explain it . . . is scary. Shitstorm scary. Something I can’t expect you to understand, without it happening to you.”

“I don’t like it when you tell me you’re scared,” she said, lying against him. They’d circled around the main drag twice now, repeating themselves, and were doing it again.

“Well, playing good in the games,” he said. “I guess that helps take some of the edge off. For now.”

She said, “How about, were you sick at all? . . . Please really think as hard as you can . . . Were you run down, any fever? . . . Aches and pains? . . . For Gosh sakes, I don’t even know what I’m asking.”

“No, you’re being reasonable,” Pike said. “I’ve been through this in my head a million times . . . Only time I was sick at all--in I can’t even remember how long--was I threw up bad for a day. But that was way back, the beginning of summer.”

“You did? Okay, that’s something.”

“Nah. What I’m pretty sure happened, it was from whatever they gave me at the dentist. Novocaine or some shit.”

“Well has that happened to you before, after the dentist?”

“Not that I remember, but this was a different dentist. We were on a trip actually.”

“You were?”

“Right when school let out. Probably I never mentioned it to you, because we hadn’t hooked up yet . . . No big deal, my parents dragged us down to the southwest. The whole thing was pretty lame.”

“But you went to the dentist on vacation?”

“Yeah. What happened, we were in the back seat, me and my sister and brother? Every time my dad got gas we’d stock up on candy from the little mini mart . . . I was chewing a wad of gummy bears, and I feel this empty pocket in my tooth. A filling came out.”

“Oh,” she said. “So you didn’t wait until you got back home?”

“I wanted to but my mom got nervous. She found someone in Albuquerque. He took care of it, though like I said, I didn’t feel great the day after. A few times we had to pull over. I leaned out the door and let it fly, which wasn’t the worst thing. The car smelled bad after, though.”

“That’s . . . all pretty interesting,” Cathy said.

“What? . . . Now you’re going to spend all night on the internet? . . . Searching for *Can something happen at the dentist that can give you superpowers?*”

“Pretty much, yes.”

Pike said, “You’re a piece of work, you know that? Come here.”

Chapter 10

Pike normally shut his phone off when he went to bed, but tonight he left it on because he needed it for the alarm.

His friend Mac's dad owned a moving company in town, in fact the only one. Sometimes he could use extra guys. It wasn't the careful, more skilled moving work that the full-time guys were doing, it was repetitive grunt work, such as carrying 500 cases of Diet Coke out of a storeroom onto the truck, for who knew what reason.

Mac's dad was generous, paid them 20 bucks an hour, which was always nice for a Sunday.

So Pike was pretty pissed off when the phone buzzed and woke him up at 3 in the morning.

It was Cathy. The message read:

Honey you need to check this out. The fifth one from the bottom. Thinking of you! -C

There was a website link.

Pike wanted badly to turn over and go back to sleep, but now of course that wouldn't work.

He flicked on a lamp, went over to his desk and sat down.

The website had *UFO Archeology* in the title, whatever the heck that meant.

Pike scrolled around for a minute before he went to the posting that Cathy unfortunately decided required waking him up. What it seemed to be, it was a place where regular people told stories about UFOs.

There were sections:

Abductions

Sightings

Unexplained Phenomena

2nd-Hand Stories

Pike thinking, *What a total bunch of crap. I got up for THIS?*

Out of obligation, he went to the page that Cathy sent him. It was under **2nd-Hand Stories**. Evidently there wasn't much organization to the pages. People (all of them doofuses Pike was sure) wrote up their silly 'experiences' and they were posted in the order they came in, with the most recent one on top.

That top one was a woman rambling on about how before her mother died, the mother tells her there was a UFO in the backyard. The woman goes back there and a patio chair is on its side that wasn't that way yesterday, which confirms it.

Jee-miny Christmas.

Pike scrolled to the fifth one from the bottom.

He didn't know what to think after reading it the first time, so he read it twice more.

There was a heading: **Aliens Messed With My Brother's Teeth**

The rest of it read:

My brother Billy got his teeth messed with by a alien. Then he got super strong. He could snap a 2 buh 4 in half if he wanted. FOR REAL. This stuff's happening, don't let nobody tell you it isn't.

There was a small registration tag: **longhaultrucker56**

Pike stared at the screen for long time.

What a crock? Right? . . . Except he was pretty damn positive HE could march into Home Depot and snap a 2 x 4 down the middle too.

He texted Cathy and told her he read it, the whole thing sounded off the deep end, but just to satisfy her he'd try to message the long haul trucker guy at some point.

Cathy's text came right back: **I already have.**

Pike texted: **U serious??? Not OK crazy dude knows who U are!**

Cathy replied: **I don't care.**

Chapter 11

On Sunday after helping Mac's dad for eight hours, this time moving a financial planning company from one strip mall to a slightly better located one, Pike was relaxing in the bathtub.

His mom knocked on the door. "PK, are you alive in there? Cathy's here."

Pike didn't expect this. He was going to call her later. She never came over without telling him first.

He put on some sweats and they went down in the basement. Pike's dad had half-finished it off a long time ago but never went any further. There was a couch and a TV, and a stack of old magazines, and books on a high shelf.

Once in a while when there was too much chaos upstairs, Pike would come down here and grab a book at random. Most of them were pretty bad and he'd give up quick, but there was one about a guy who trades places with another guy in a different state, more to it than that, but they switch identities, and Pike was captivated by that one and read it cover to cover.

Cathy said, "I'm jumping around for a moment . . . But did you get tired out today, helping Mac? I mean the soaking in the tub and such?"

Pike stuck his hands out and pushed down, meaning we need to keep this conversation quiet.

"I know where you're going," he said. "And I did . . . I do . . . get worn out . . . Not exactly the same as when I was *normal*, but yep." He was whispering at the end.

Cathy nodded. "Reggie Riley got back to me," she said.

"Say *who*?"

"The man who posted about his brother. He was eager to talk about it."

"You've got to be kidding," Pike said. "Well first of all . . . where is he? . . . at?"

"He drives a truck, back and forth across the country. I'm not sure honestly where he home base might be."

Pike said, "Well where's the brother then? The one who got the special alien treatment."

"Billy . . . He died in Afghanistan," Cathy said.

Pike let that hang. "How long ago?"

“Not sure. But he was in the Marines.”

“Sheez . . . Did the guy . . . say anything else? . . . I mean, just one day, his brother woke up . . . and he was all of a sudden super strong? . . . Or what?”

“Seemed like it,” Cathy said. “Reggie said his brother only told a few people . . . He was afraid he might get studied by the government, or something similar, if word got around.”

“Okay, now we’re going in the Twilight Zone here,” Pike said.

But at the same time he remembered a movie he once saw about a lab worker who goes invisible from an industrial accident. In the movie, the government WAS trying to track him down, in fact that was most of the story, the guy dodging ‘em.

Cathy said, “He also said . . . there could be situations, where his friends that knew, they might not be completely safe.”

Pike thinking, *See, this is one of the things I was worried about. I still am.*

Cathy slid herself onto his lap.

Pike said, “All right. First thing, you got some crazy trucker conversing with you now . . . What’s he gonna think, you contacting him like that? . . . On the other part . . . I don’t know what to say.”

She looked up at him and smiled, “You don’t need to say anything. It’s not an issue.”

“It’s not? . . . Well, what about the first part?”

“I told him I’m contacting him on behalf of my husband,” she said.

“Oh,” Pike said.

Chapter 12

Manhattan Beach, California

September 26, 2016

Mitch Corrigan exited the ocean a little early this morning. He'd caught maybe five good waves, so it wasn't a total waste. But his knee was bothering him, it hurt every time he stood up, which in surfing you had to do frequently and fast.

There was a reality that he slowly but surely was dealing with, that he was a senior citizen now. Not an old man exactly, still pretty vibrant and fit, and he still did his regular run down to Redondo and back, three afternoons a week along the paved trail, the Strand, which extended along the edge of the sand.

Still, being able to buy a lifetime pass to the national parks now for a measly 10 bucks, one of perks of having turned 62, was a wake-up call. Melinda encouraged him to pick up a pass. She still had a couple years to go. Mitch kind of felt she was rubbing it in, but time marched on, which he supposed he needed to accept, though it was tough, having been a lifelong athlete.

He carried his board up Manhattan Beach Boulevard and stopped in at Peet's Coffee. There were regulars that knew him and it was a friendly scene. There were sections of the LA Times laying around and he skimmed the main news but zeroed in on the sports section.

He always gave it about a half hour, and then headed back to the apartment. They lived only a block-and-a-half away, across Ardmore and then up the hill on the left. It was a one-bedroom, not much to it, kind of shabby, with plenty of street noise, but it was affordable in this insane south bay housing market. And you could walk to the dang beach.

What they did actually, they had a little house in Pahrump, Nevada, the high desert. They got in at the right time, bought it for cash, and now rotated between there and the MB apartment. Depending on weather, ocean conditions, and whatever other factors they liked to bring into it.

Life was pretty good. Melinda had her friends and her set activities and a couple classes that she took, and his day was pretty much his.

The one thing she nagged him about was his website. She contended that he was putting entirely too much time and energy into it, and that he should at least be getting paid SOMETHING for his 7-day-a-week effort.

It wasn't that they urgently needed the money, since they had enough retirement income to be comfortable, though they couldn't of course live it up like The Ritz. But for Melinda it was the principle of the thing.

The not-getting-paid part didn't bother Mitch at all. It had turned out to be one of the most rewarding things he'd done, and he poured himself into it every morning when got back to the apartment.

He'd seen a UFO, he was pretty damn sure, when he was 20 years old and had a summer job working in a medical lab in Reno, when one night they had him drive something to another lab in Las Vegas. Somewhere in between, on the old two-lane US 95, he saw a glowing object hovering over the ridge to the east, maybe 10 miles away. He pulled over and fished out his camera to take a picture, but by the time he did all that the thing was gone.

For several years afterward he didn't give it too much thought, even wondering if maybe his mind had played tricks on him. But then he started hearing rumors about a place called Area 51, and the weird things that might be going on there, and which was located in the vicinity of where he'd been driving through the Nevada high desert that night.

And he became a UFO junkie.

And it was no accident, really, that he convinced Melinda to buy the house in Pahrump, which didn't have a lot to recommend it except it was peaceful and right there on the edge of things.

There were a ton of YouTube channels now that featured UFO videos, only a small portion of them real, Mitch decided, but a portion was good enough, and he enjoyed clicking around on the channels and he had his favorites.

But he liked the way his own site was set up and had no plans to change anything. A few basic categories was all you needed, and it was essentially a throw-mud-at-the-wall-and-let-it-stick approach. Readers often told him they liked the random format, since you never knew what you were going to find on there at any given hour.

People wrote in with their stories from around the world, or sometimes called in, and then Mitch would take notes and transcribe them. What appealed to him was the simplicity of ordinary people telling ordinary stories, except that sometimes something supernatural was involved.

Even the fake stories, Mitch felt, had merit. Someone had to invent the story, after all, no matter how far out there it might be, and why not simply leave it to the readers to judge what was real and what wasn't? If anything, the fake stories helped the real ones jump out.

So he worked on the site much of the day, and sometimes at night too when he couldn't sleep. When they were in Pahrump, he'd often sit out on the back patio with his laptop and fiddle with his site and frequently check the sky. There were enough local lights to sometimes interfere with optimum sky viewing, but you never knew.

Today, like most days, Melinda was gone when he got back to the apartment in Manhattan Beach. He took a nice hot shower, getting rid of all the salt and sand, put on some loose clothes and sandals, and started getting organized. He always checked the answering machine first. His was old-school--the physical machine with the cassette tapes and the flashing red light.

There were three messages. One from someone with an Indian accent saying they saw something outside of Vancouver and giving a few details. The second from a lady in Iowa, saying she thought there was a fighter jet chasing something unusual over their trailer park. The third from a young-sounding guy saying it was important and to please call him.

Anyhow, he'd get to all that a little later. The good thing about his office set-up, in the corner of the living room, was that the recliner was only a few feet away, and he could head over there and take a little snooze whenever he felt like it.

Chapter 13

There was more of a buzz at school on Monday than normal, since this Friday was a showdown game against Walker Union. Hamilton and Walker were tied for first place in the league standings, and the winner of this game would be in good position to make the sectional playoffs, since the remainder of the regular season schedule was somewhat weak.

Hamilton hadn't made the sectionals in six years, and Pike was well aware that he was having a lot to do with this unexpected uptick.

There was a guilt part to the whole thing as well, that it wasn't really HIM doing anything out there, it was just happening. He felt kind of like a robot taking care of his job. More than once it entered his head: *Should he stop this charade and quit the sport?*

But today he had something bigger on his mind. The digging around that Cathy had done, and the Reggie-guy truck driver with the brother and all that nonsense.

This was all too friggin' bizarre. And he'd bet anything the guy was making it all up. Every word of it.

Except . . . *An alien messing with his brother's teeth?* And the brother, Billy, suddenly getting strong, real strong . . . *Like ME.*

Before he left for school this morning, Pike went back on that website. At the bottom, in small type, was the contact information for the Administrator.

He clicked on it, and it took you to a page with a photo of some old guy, where it said you can email in your stories (the preferred method) or call them in if you need to. There was a phone number.

Pike thought about it for five minutes while he devoured a bowl of Cheerios and dialed the number. There was a scratchy message on the other end, that we can't take your call right now but it's important to us and we'll return it. Pike left his callback and email and went to school.

Mid-afternoon he was on his locker room bench getting ready for practice, Marty Clarke on one side of him and Amos Stillman on the other, when his phone rings.

"Hello, name's Mitch from the UFO Archeology site," the caller said. "Can I help you?"

"Oh," Pike said, getting up. "Oh yeah . . . I appreciate you getting back to me . . . Except right now's not the best time, exactly."

“That’s fair enough . . . It there a better time? Or how about you give me the gist of it, 20 words or less.” The man seemed friendly enough, and he laughed.

Pike walked to back of the locker room and pushed open a side door and stepped outside. “Okay in a nutshell,” he said, “you ever hear anything . . . this is going to sound strange . . . but anything about someone . . . sort of changing . . . after going to the dentist?”

“Ah,” Mitch said.

“I mean,” Pike continued, “I’ll tell you right now, no way I believe in this UFO shit . . . but there was something about a guy and his brother and teeth . . . the alien part was a bunch of hogwash, but you ever hear anything else? Along these lines?”

“This is quite interesting,” Mitch said. “And I thank you for inquiring. This type of open dialogue is what we’re frankly all about.”

Oh boy. “Well, I have to go,” Pike said.

Mitch said, “What I’ll do then, I’ll research your concern. And I *will* get back to you.”

“Not really a *concern*,” Pike said. “More like a question.”

“Understood,” Mitch said, and clicked off.

Pike finished suiting up for practice, thinking *what the heck did I just do*.

Ten minutes later they were on the field, preparing for the Walker Union game, and, at least for the time being, he was able to put the whole shebang on the back burner, and have some fun.

Driving home from practice, there was a Cal Trans road crew working a small patch of asphalt on Elm Street. They had bright, portable lights set up, and there was a flagman.

Pike knew the spot. There was a nasty pothole there, and it had gotten worse the last couple days. He edged forward toward the flagman until he we was next in line.

There was another hardhat guy standing there with a clipboard, behind and off to the left of the flagman, and meanwhile a two-ton truck full of asphalt was backing up. Pike assumed the hardhat guy was aware of the truck, and he assumed the flagman was aware of the guy, but *you never knew*.

Plus he could see that the hardhat guy had earbuds on, and like an idiot he was facing away from the truck, and he really *might* not know it was backing up toward him.

Pike threw it into park and got out of the car, trying to keep it casual, but moving toward the guy, keeping an eye on the truck. The truck was putting out that steady *Beep beep beep* they make when they're in reverse, and Pike had to make a decision.

Pike yelled to the hardhat guy, but the guy didn't react like he heard him. So with the truck 10 feet away, Pike scooped the guy up under the armpits and tried to gently sweep him outside the line of fire.

Unfortunately it didn't come out so gentle, and the hardhat guy went up in the air for a second and came down and skittered to a stop along the asphalt on the far side of the pothole.

He got up slowly, tried to dust himself off. His work pants were torn through at the knees and his palms were kind of cut up. "What THE FUCK!" he yelled at Pike.

The flagman was helping the hardhat guy and the driver stopped the truck and got out.

Pike said, "I . . . I'm sorry sir. I just . . . reacted. Didn't know if you were going to get run over there."

The flagman was laughing. "He did get run over," the guy said. "*You* ran him over." The truck driver started laughing now too, both of them with their shoulders wiggling up and down below their hardhats, which got Pike wanting to laugh himself, but he didn't.

"Anyway . . ." Pike said to the clipboard guy, hoping that was it and he could hightail it out of there.

The dude was rolling his neck around, like he was making sure everything still worked. "I'm okay," he said.

"Oh good," Pike said, and started getting back in the car.

"Good throw though," the flagman said, and he and the driver had another good laugh, and Pike drove off.

Cathy came by after dinner and they were up in Pike's room supposedly doing homework together.

Pike said, "Well, there was another superman type deal today. Not as important maybe as stopping that thief.

"Ooh," Cathy said. "What now?"

“Ah, I probably overreacted. I thought someone might get run over, and I sort of flung them out of the way.”

“You mean . . . *really* flung him?”

“I’m not sure. The man might realize later that it wasn’t quite normal. Luckily he was pretty mad, so that kind of overshadowed it.”

Cathy thought about it. “So okay . . . you’re doing good then . . . For the world. You should be proud.”

“Yeah well, something tells me you’re worried, just like me, that sooner or later one of these . . . do-goods . . . it’ll get way out of hand.”

She didn’t respond to that, one way or the other. She said, “When I came in, your mom said for us to come down and get cookies when they came out of the oven. Should we?”

“Well to tell you the truth, I’ve been smelling them,” Pike said. “Wouldn’t be the worst thing.”

His phone rang.

“Pike? Mitch Corrigan.”

“Oh hi,” Pike said.

“I wanted to touch base. Let you know I didn’t forget about you . . . Nothing definitive yet.”

“Okay. Maybe don’t worry about it actually then.”

“Whoa, are you sure?” Mitch said. “It’s my pleasure, you’re not putting me out, if that’s a concern.”

Pike was still picturing the dude from a few hours ago, taking his little ride, airborne.

He said, “Only reason I contacted you . . . a friend of mine, he got a new filling, then he felt sick the next day . . . Then later he got stronger than normal . . . Though probably he’s just thinking that. Since he’s been lifting weights too.”

“I see . . .,” Mitch said. “Your friend . . . is he worried about anything?”

“I haven’t asked him lately . . . Hard to know, I guess.”

There was a silence.

“Then tell your friend, please relax,” Mitch said. His voice was kind. “We’ll sort this out . . . Everything’s going to be fine.”

“Kay,” Pike said.

“Where’s your friend live, if you don’t mind my asking? I see your area code, it looks like the central valley.”

“Right. He lives with me, I mean my town. Beacon.”

“That where he went to the dentist, then?”

“Not sure on that,” Pike said. “I’ll ask him.”

“That would help,” Mitch said. “When did all this happen to him . . . as far as you know?”

“I’m thinking he said right after school let out for the summer. So I guess it would have been June? . . . The getting sick part, that was the next day, or thereabouts . . . From what I understand.”

“All right, good. Now you say he developed an odd strength? . . . That happened along with him becoming ill.”

“No,” Pike said. “That part came later . . . Like just a couple weeks ago, I think.”

Mitch didn’t say anything for a minute. Pike assumed he was writing stuff down.

“All-righty then,” Mitch said.

Pike said, “Does any of this . . . ring a bell at all now?”

“We’ll find out,” Mitch said, and they hung up.

Cathy said, “Okay. What?”

“Nah, nothing much. That was your website man, the guy in charge I guess.”

“Wow . . . How did that all happen?”

“Not important. Just out of curiosity, did you hear anything more from that Reggie person?”

“No I haven’t.”

“Well let’s get some cookies,” Pike said.

Chapter 14

That Friday night Hamilton beat Walker Union, but Pike didn't have a great game, though he was able to pull it together at the end.

He was missing some throws to open receivers, not a big concern for a normal quarterback who could have an off-day, but that hadn't happened to Pike before. He started wondering during the game if something was going haywire inside him.

This just made things worse. Walker Union led by 10 in the fourth quarter, and Pike picked it up in the last 5 minutes, was pretty much letter-perfect then, and he helped Hamilton march down the field twice and take the lead with inside a minute left, and then hold on for the win.

So afterwards he was pretty convinced that nothing had changed, that he was probably preoccupied with the UFO garbage, and that the problem earlier in the game was mental, not physical.

There was a party afterward at a kid named Colton's house, one of the running backs, and Pike stopped by. Foxe ignored him, but no one tried to fight him this time. Gina was there, and Pike expected Cathy to show up, and was a little surprised she hadn't come with Gina.

"Not sure," Gina said when Pike asked her.

That was kind of a weird answer. Maybe the two of them had an argument?

He texted Cathy and helped himself to a half a glass of punch that had something added to it, and waited for Cathy to get back. An hour went by, and he didn't have a good feeling at all.

He left the party and drove to her house. Her dad answered the door and said he'd go get her, and Cathy came outside and they took a walk down the driveway. She looked distraught.

"What the heck," Pike said.

"Babe I'm sorry," she said. "It's too much for me."

"You mean . . . *my* thing?"

"Yes . . . I thought I had it under control, but I can't handle it right now."

Pike wasn't feeling too good, and he sat down on the sidewalk.

Cathy said, "It's totally my fault, is what it is . . . I'm obviously not a strong enough person. I've let this get to me."

Pike's voice was weak. "I get it," he said. "It were me, and this was reversed, I'd feel the same . . . you handled it darn well . . . no way was that all right for me jam you with this . . . burden."

"I'll still see you at school, and stuff," she said.

"Sure. But . . . let's just cool the jets," he said. "Right?"

Cathy put a hand on his cheek and nodded, and he watched her turn and go quickly up the driveway and disappear into the house.

Chapter 15

When Pike got home he made a beeline for his room and closed the door. He put his head in the pillow and let himself sob for a couple minutes.

Now what?

He turned on the computer. Maybe find a movie, to take him *the heck* somewhere else.

He had his friend Vaughn's sign-in info, which Vaughn had said use any time but Pike never had until now, and he went on Netflix and started looking around. His mind all over the place, none of it good.

An email came in. The last thing he wanted to do was check it, but there was at least a chance it was from Cathy, wasn't there?

It was from that guy Mitch.

It read: **Have some information.**

That was it? What the heck.

This is all he needed now. *My girlfriend dumps me, and some loony tune off the internet is teasing me with something out of a Martian comic book.*

Most likely . . .

Pike shut down the email and stretched out on his bed with the laptop and ended up watching 'The Passengers'.

Of all movies.

There's like a 99-year space voyage to another planet, and they hibernate everyone so they won't age. But something goes wrong and one guy wakes up. Basically the movie is: Should the dude wake up someone else, so he has company, even though he'll be screwing them over.

Pike decided when you allowed yourself to buy into the ridiculous set-up, the movie wasn't bad. But you had to let go of what you knew was not realistic.

Mrs. Hopper, his 10th-grade English teacher, one of the few classes where he paid attention, called it: you're suspending disbelief. This was when they were reading a science fiction story. A guy comes home from work, and everything is reversed in his neighborhood. The story was pretty good, it kept you off balance.

But like Mrs. Hooper said, you had to read it with a different type mind, otherwise you'd laugh out loud and toss the book in the garbage

It was going to be tough to sleep tonight. Pike put on some Dierks Bentley and laid there in the dark and did his best.

He rarely drank coffee but it smelled good this morning, and he went downstairs. His dad was sitting at the table.

"Just read the game story in the paper PK. Way to go."

"Thanks Dad," Pike said, still glad his dad was as casual about it as he was. Every game, on the sidelines, and even out there on the field, Pike could hear plenty of other guys' dads yelling stuff from the stands.

"We're all going to Ben and Jackie's today," his dad said. "They finished building that addition. They're having a barbeque, pool party type affair. Don't suppose you want to come?"

"Nah, I'm good. Little chilly for a pool party too, it sounds like."

"Yeah, well, it's the spirit of the thing . . . Tell you the truth, for your mother and me, at our stage, there isn't a whole heck of a lot to do in this town. So you take what you can get . . . *You're* looking at it different, you're in the middle of all that action."

"Not that much, really," Pike said.

"Have fun with it," his dad said. "You got what, seven, eight months? Then everything changes. The real game begins."

"Jeez. You're dropping some heavy stuff on me."

His dad laughed. "Don't mean to be. But there's a reality. We all go through it . . . Anyhow, you got a terrific gal there, in Cathy. Don't foul that up, and you'll be fine." He winked at Pike and headed out to the yard.

Pike supposed he should get back to the Mitch guy. If he emailed him, that would be short and sweet, he could just say *What do you got, please?* and forget about it until if-and-when Mitch spelled out something halfway concrete, and even then it likely wouldn't be worth paying attention to.

But he went ahead and phoned him.

"You just caught me," Mitch said. "I'm halfway out the door, on my way to the beach."

“At 7:30 in the morning?” Pike said.

“Absolutely. I surf. Or at least the old man’s version.”

“Whatever . . . you sent me a message?”

“Yes. I want to talk to you. I can drive up there, it’s only about three hours, depending on traffic.”

“You do? . . . When?”

“I can come this afternoon. The only thing I would ask, that we meet just the two of us.”

“So . . . whatever it is you want to tell me--that I can pass on to my friend--it’s not for public consumption?”

“Not really, no.”

Pike thought it over. “How about this. I come down there.”

“That’s fine too,” Mitch said. “Long as you’re up for the drive.”

“I’m cool with it. I’ll figure it out.”

“Fine then. Like I said, the only thing, you want to be travelling solo.”

Mitch gave him basic directions to Manhattan Beach, told him where to park where he wouldn’t get towed, and to meet him at the pier, at the first bench on the left, that overlooked the volleyball courts.

When they hung up, the question popped up again: *What did I just do?*

Chapter 16

Mitch wasn't kidding when he said three hours, give or take traffic. Everything was smooth until he got to around Santa Monica, and you'd think you were almost there, just a couple beach towns down now, but you started crawling then, and it didn't let up until you hit Sepulveda Boulevard.

Pike parked in a neighborhood a half mile from the beach where Mitch told him, and walked into town. This was nice. Everyone casual, no one in a rush. Lots of sandals and board shorts. Girls in bikinis heading toward the beach.

There was a competitive volleyball tournament going on in the sand, and there was a bench on the pier that overlooked it, right where Mitch said. Pike saw an old guy sitting there with a polo shirt and one of those straw hats with something wrapped around it like you see golfers wear.

Before he could say anything, from ten feet away the man said, "Pike, right?" The guy was pretty sharp. They shook hands and Pike sat down.

It was early afternoon, late September, a gold-medal day down here, and you could take it all in from up on the pier.

There were surfers and boogie boarders and bodysurfers and a million people jogging and biking and having fun. Pike decided, honestly, how could it get much better than this?

"Let me guess what you're thinking," Mitch said.

"Well I've been to Huntington a couple times, and Santa Monica and Santa Barbara . . . But I don't know, this kinda . . . beats 'em all."

Mitch smiled. "Exactly why the wife and I hole up in this town."

"I know . . . But what's something run you down here? People must need damn good jobs to afford it."

"You got that right. We have more or less a dive. But you don't have to be inside much, if you don't want to . . . That's not why you came down though, to listen to me ramble."

"No."

Mitch clasped his fingers behind his head and took a look out toward the horizon. "You got a friend," he said. "Or it is *you* we're dealing with?"

Pike didn't have the energy to keep up the charade, and he didn't know this Mitch guy from anything. But he felt comfortable with him.

"Me," he said.

"Okay then. I got nothing definitive, mind you, just a few dots that may be connecting themselves."

"Before you get going on that," Pike said. "You gotta be joking, if you're going to be telling me I got suddenly strong because of an *alien*."

Mitch said, "Before I got into this stuff, *really* dived into it when I started the website, I thought the same way as you . . . But there must be some reason you drove four hours today."

"Because I don't know what else to do!" Pike said. "Not a whole heck of lot of options." It was one of the few times since it had happened that he felt his emotions getting away from him.

Mitch said quietly, "Do you want to tell me about it?"

Pike was weighing it, thinking: *Only Cathy knows so far. Is there any risk to telling this guy? Is he gonna call the government and have them study me?*

His gut instinct was the man wanted to help him, nothing more complicated than that. And that went along something Coach had been telling him too, that no matter what play they want you to run, sometimes you just have to go with your gut.

"What it was, the first I knew of anything," Pike said, "I tackled a guy. Our first league game. Three weeks ago now . . . Then later in the game another guy. I shouldn't have been able to hurt him, but I did . . . Then the next day, I kind of experimented, and the game stuff wasn't a fluke . . . There've also been, some incidents."

"What kind?" Mitch said.

"Ah, I threw a guy in town like he was a loaf of bread. You're probably going to laugh, but I also picked up a car, at least the front end."

"I'm with you . . . How you feeling now? Lately."

"Good. I mean *not good*, because I don't know what the fuck is going on . . . Sorry."

Mitch tore open a little bag of peanuts and popped a handful in his mouth. "See the gal in the green?" he said, nodded toward the volleyball court. "She's on her way to UCLA, full ride. She's all conference everything at Mira Costa."

"When I was a sophomore, we actually played them," Pike said. "I didn't make the trip though. I was third string."

"So you . . . doing any more damage out there on the field, these last few weeks?"

“Not that kind of damage. They took me off defense, stuck me at QB.”

Mitch took a minute, was scrolling around on his phone now. “Man-Alive. You been lighting it up.”

“Yeah. It’s kind of like I was telling my girlfriend. It feels sort of hollow.”

“So she knows? How about your parents?”

“No. Just her. And we broke up.”

“Okay now, I got one more question for you, kid. You hungry?”

“Are you kidding? I’m starving,” Pike said. Mitch got up and said he knew the right place, and they walked up a couple blocks to an old-time restaurant called The Kettle. Mitch said to get whatever he wanted, it was on him.

Pike couldn’t help notice the amazing girls down here, they were all over the place. *God dang.*

Chapter 17

“I played some ball myself myself,” Mitch was saying. Pike was busy putting away the second of two club sandwiches.

“High school, JC ball and then I walked on at Michigan State.”

“You’re kidding,” Pike said. “What position?”

“Wide receiver. A slow white guy with decent hands.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Ah, you’re being kind. I wouldn’t mind watching you play though.”

“I’ve thought about quitting the team. It’s like I’m getting away with using that performance enhancing shit that they’re always banning guys for? . . . Except mine is a hundred times more potent.”

“Don’t do that, don’t quit,” Mitch said. “That would be unfair to your teammates, it would essentially discombobulate everything.”

“Yeah, that was kinda my thought,” Pike said.

The waitress cleared their plates and Mitch ordered a coffee and waited until it came. “What I’m going to tell you now,” he said, “it’s going to come across strange. You just have to keep an open mind, and hear me out.”

Pike didn’t say anything.

“There’s a guy wrote in about the teeth thing,” Mitch said.

“I know. My girlfriend saw that, which is how I found you.”

“Fine. Last few days, I’ve been scouring my database for anything similar. There have been a few . . . But first, you haven’t gone into it yet, who’s your dentist?”

“It wasn’t my normal dentist. We were on a trip. My mom made me replace a filling that fell out.”

“Interesting . . . on a trip where?”

“The southwest.”

“So, a small town dentist down there?”

“Not really. Albuquerque. Big office, part of a medical center deal.”

“Let me ask you this. What kind of filling did you get?”

“The old type, that has mercury. My mom didn’t like that idea, but the dentist said it would be stronger, since it was a replacement.”

“May I take a look?” Mitch said.

“Why not,” Pike said, and opened his mouth. There was one amalgam filling, lower right. The rest of his teeth were white.

Mitch was rubbing his forehead.

“What?” Pike said. “Now you’re going to tell me the dentist was an alien and he implanted me one of those things from a sci-fi horror movie? Where some guy goes to the doctor and they take this little black rectangle out of his forearm.”

“Implants, those are different,” Mitch said. “Not the same animal.”

“Oh.”

“No. Some of those, they’ve sent to labs, and there’s been documentation. They can’t fully identify the chemical makeup, based on our existing periodic table.”

“Whatever. Total crap,” Pike said.

“I would beg to differ with you there,” Mitch said. “But let’s leave the implant angle alone right now. That’s a whole ‘nother area.”

“You’re starting to kill me here. What’s *my* angle then?”

“Bottom line, I’ve found three cases that could be similar to yours. All of them posted in the last two years.”

“*How* similar?” Pike said.

“I have requests in to all three,” Mitch said. “The first one, a man in Florida. The second, a lady in Utah. And the third, the recent posting, that caught your girlfriend’s eye.”

“That guy, he died in Afghanistan. Or so the brother said.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, Cathy--my ex--she’s been conversing with him . . . ”

“Hmm,” Mitch said. “So . . . if I could ask you, Pike, do you feel pain?”

“I been through this a couple times. Not as much as I should, but yeah.”

“Well on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being what you used to feel, how would you rate now?”

“A 2 or 3,” he said. “I bleed and shit. Again, not as much.”

“Do you need as much sleep?”

“Oh yeah, you’re not kidding. I get just as tired as ever.”

“Can you see better?”

“I don’t think so . . . same thing with hearing and smelling, if that’s where you’re going.”

“Is . . . schoolwork any easier? Or possibly more difficult?”

“Nah,” Pike said. “Same brain, for better or worse . . . The only difference now, if I headbutted someone I might kill them.”

Mitch finished his coffee and cleared his throat. “No doubt I’ll think of more, but the final question for now: Is there any indication at all, that this may be . . . a passing thing?”

“You’re saying, could it be evolving? . . . That’s something I’m worried about every day. Some kind of *mutation* shit.”

“I was wondering more,” Mitch said, “if your situation might simply be temporary.”

“And it would just wear off? Quick as it arrived? Like a bad drug . . . or a bad dream.”

“Exactly.”

“If that happens, you’ll be the first to know.”

Mitch angled them left coming out of The Kettle and then turned right again down the main drag, back toward the beach.

“Where we going?” Pike said.

“Where else? Unless you have somewhere you need to be.”

“No I’m good.” Pike was thinking he’d sleep overnight on the beach if it were legal. Why not, it was warm enough.

They took a walk on the paved path that bordered the sand. “The Strand,” Mitch said. “These houses, as you can see, some a lot fancier than others. But between here and Hermosa, even a tear-down’ll cost you 10 mil, plus. Market’s red-hot.”

“Now that’s depressing,” Pike said.

There was some commotion near the water and a lifeguard was running, carrying his red rescue thing, which Pike assumed was a flotation device. Mitch had his hands up, shading his eyes, watching the ocean.

Without thinking about it, Pike started running across the sand. The lifeguard was swimming out now, toward a couple of people who didn’t look normal out there.

Pike ripped off his shoes and shirt and tore into the water, catching up to the lifeguard in about five seconds. It was a man and woman, Hispanic, and they seemed okay now. They’d been clinging together to a boogie board and a big wave must have displaced them and they’d panicked.

The lifeguard was asking them some questions, and suggested they take a break for a while. The man and woman thanked him, and came in.

Pike picked up his shoes and shirt and started back across the beach toward Mitch, who he could see watching from the same position on the Strand.

“The guy say anything to you?” Mitch said. “The lifeguard?”

“Not much. Just thanks for keeping an eye out.”

“That was some display.”

“It was? I didn’t *do* anything.”

“You did good, kid,” Mitch said.

Chapter 18

He took his time driving home, stopping a couple times to eat. He left his phone off the whole way. It gave him a chance to think.

Mitch was a nice guy, with a good heart. Yeah, he was satisfying his own curiosity, that was part of it, the whole damn thing playing out like a big dramatic mystery. But Pike didn't regret telling him what was going on. In fact as he stared at the road now, nighttime out there, it was a relief to get it off his chest.

When he got home his parents and brother and sister were sitting in the living room watching TV. Jackie and Bo were goofing around a little, not much though, and his parents looked grim. Something was wrong.

"What the heck?" Pike said.

"Oh hey PK," his dad said. "Thought you might have heard . . . A drunk driver, they killed someone."

"Say WHAT?" Pike said. "Who . . . when?"

"We don't know. Channel 4 keeps cutting in. Was about two hours ago, on Birch and Ortega."

Pike could picture it. It was only a couple blocks over from where that pothole thing happened, where he intervened with the road construction guys. Birch was residential, but fed into Highway 27, and drivers sometimes started picking up speed early.

He went upstairs and checked his phone. There were a bunch of texts. He wanted to call Cathy, make sure she was okay, but he knew she was. It would be a lame excuse to try to talk to her, which she didn't want.

It hit him that he was pretty darn tired, and he sat back for a minute on the bed, one foot still on the floor, and he was out like a rock until someone turned on the shower and started banging around in the bathroom an hour and a half later.

There was a lot more on the phone now, some rumours spreading, and he turned on the news. It was an ugly scene. The way they were piecing it together, the drunk had crossed over into the oncoming lane and then lost control correcting himself, and ran up on the sidewalk, hitting a mother who was walking the dog with her daughter.

God DAMN IT.

Pike stayed in his room the rest of the night, checking his phone for updates.

Trying to wrap his head around yet something else.

What a downer, especially after the glimmer of hope today in Manhattan Beach.

By midnight it alarmingly surfaced that the drunk driver was Foxe's dad.

Pike sat there stunned, wondering should he call someone, but who? And what would you say?

Fifteen minutes later they announced that Hailey Milburn and her mom were the ones walking the dog, and Hailey's mom was hit and killed.

Pike felt a wave of emotions, the main one helplessness. Hailey was the younger sister of Audrey Milburn, who'd been in his class all the way through, since elementary school. Hailey was a sophomore, sweet girl, he said hello to her sometimes when he'd see her in the hall. Audrey was a senior like him. Now they didn't have a mom.

A whole mess of stuff continued running through his head at once. Foxe wanting to beat him up that time, and him feeling bad for the guy now, though that made no sense.

Audrey most likely had been out having fun somewhere earlier tonight. Pike would see her at school again, but it would all be different from this point on.

And poor Hailey. Having to witness it, be part of it. Wait with your mom while the ambulance came.

And the irony, the dog was fine, they announced.

Pike let all this simmer for a while. He wouldn't be able to get any rest tonight.

Part of him felt ashamed, for dwelling so much on himself.

Except he knew it was unrealistic, that he could forget his own stupid situation and move on. But tonight he tried.

Chapter 19

Sunday, people were solemnly stopping by the Milburn house paying their respects to the dad and to Audrey and Hailey.

Pike thought he should stay away from that kind of thing, that Audrey had too much on her plate this soon, but by the afternoon he heard from a couple kids who did pay a visit and it seemed the right thing to do.

The Milburns were pretty well off, and lived in a three-story brick Colonial on Ortega, fifty yards away from where it happened.

The dad was holed up in the bedroom, and now and then someone would head up there. Audrey was in the living room, dressed nicely, some make-up, trying her best to smile and say thank you. Hailey was in the kitchen, taking some frozen appetizers out of the oven.

Pike started to say something to Audrey but his vocal cords froze up, and all he could do was bend down and give her a hug. She felt warm, feverish. How could she not still be in a state of shock?

Audrey was going out with Jack Hannamaker, a linebacker on the team, and it took a minute for Pike to notice Jack, sitting on a folding chair off to the side, looking down at his hands and uncomfortably rubbing them around.

Pike stood there for five minutes, just as uncomfortable, and as he was leaving Coach came in. Pike thinking this was odd, was he apologizing on behalf of Foxe and the team, or what, but then he realized Coach taught a freshman health class that was required unless you played a sport, which Audrey and Hailey didn't, so he must have known them from that class.

Coach was brief, and Pike left with him.

All Coach said to him on the way out was, "We're off 'till Wednesday," meaning football practice.

Pike didn't care for Foxe, but a part of him wanted reach out to the guy somehow, but that would probably be going too far.

The halls were pin-drop quiet at school on Monday, and not much different Tuesday. There were announcements both days, and brief assemblies. One of Pike's teachers, Mr. Kiley, for math, asked if the class wanted to go ahead as usual, or spend the hour discussing the tragedy. Pike was surprised that the class voted to continue with regular math.

By Wednesday things at Hamilton were pretty much back to normal. Practice was lively, probably because guys had built-up energy with the days off. Friday night they'd be playing at Stevenson, a weak team they should dominate.

Pike had a thought. Since they'd most likely be way ahead at halftime, he'd tell coach his arm was bothering him, and that would let Foxe come in and play the whole second half. Even if coach knew Pike was jerking him around, he'd put Foxe in anyway.

But then after practice on Wednesday Coach huddled everyone up and announced that Foxe had quit the team.

That night Mitch called. He was enthusiastic. "Hey my friend, what's happening?" he said.

Pike told him about the drunk driver mowing an adult he knew, and how in this little town most people have been affected by it in some way.

Mitch said, "I apologize then . . . Exceedingly bad timing."

"No, no," Pike said. "One thing has nothing to do with the other . . . Is there . . . anything?"

"Well there is a little bit, in the way of an update. Okay we've got the man in Florida and the lady in Utah that I mentioned? With cases similar to yours?"

"Yeah. Who both are convinced an alien implanted them, right?"

"Maybe, but forget that. I started them both off with a basic question, and they've both gotten back to me . . . I put it them simply: Did you receive an amalgam filling within six months of your physical change."

"And?"

"They both said yes."

It took Pike a long moment to process this. "Son of a bitch," he said.

"I thought you'd be interested," Mitch said. "Where we go from here, I have to figure it out."

"What about the third guy, with the trucker brother?"

"Didn't hear from him yet."

“But what you’re slowly but surely telling me,” Pike said, “And I’m not even believing this . . . something in the God dang filling . . . really may be causing this?”

“That, or in the procedure itself,” Mitch said.

“Well, what’s *in* a metal filling, anyhow?”

“I’m working on it. Apparently a mixture of materials.”

“All right . . . but you know something? If this made any sense at all . . . You got a handful of people in the whole country, that this happens to?”

“I have no doubt there are many more,” Mitch said. “But you have a good point . . . Several very interesting angles to follow up.”

Pike was thinking *I couldn’t care less about angles or what’s interesting for YOU. Get to the bottom of MY nightmare, how about.*

But he knew Mitch meant well, and let’s face it, he’d come up with this piece now. Pike was afraid to go so far as call it *concrete*, but still it was something, and it wasn’t like he had anything else jumping out at him.

When he hung up with Mitch he wondered if Cathy had heard anything more from Reggie Riley, but it would be would way awkward to call her and ask.

Chapter 20

Things turned even uglier in town on Thursday. Foxe's dad spent a few days in jail and then got bailed out. What he should have done, was go somewhere else. Stay with a relative in another town, check into a motel a couple hundred miles away, something.

Instead he went right back home, and the impression you couldn't help getting was he was going about his business like nothing happened.

Of course he would have to contend with a trial coming up and he'd probably be sent away to prison, but you never could tell for sure how these things might play out once the legal system got involved. Pike knew from watching enough TV that there were weird outcomes sometimes, where murderers got away with it.

Either way, today Mr. Foxe was just a regular man living in town. He had a plumbing and heating business, and who knows, maybe he'd be back at work tomorrow installing a new hot water heater for someone.

Hailey and Audrey's dad Mr. Milburn was apparently thinking the same thing. Thursday afternoon around 4, a few hours after Mr. Foxe got bailed out and was back home, Mr. Milburn rang the bell and when Mr. Foxe answered he hit him over the head with a baseball bat.

Luckily (or maybe unluckily) the door frame caught some of the blow and blunted it, and although Mr. Foxe went down, he wasn't out cold, and he was able to recover and scramble off down the hall. When Mr. Milburn followed him with the bat, Mrs. Foxe appeared and let out a piercing scream that stopped him.

Mr. Milburn sat on the front stoop and waited for the police, and they took him away. So on Thursday night you had Foxe's dad in the hospital, the same one where Pike visited that kid after the game, and you had Hailey and Audrey's dad now under arrest.

Pike couldn't help wondering, was there a way he could put whatever this power thing was to good use, and cleanly kill off Mr. Foxe?

It was an insane thought, he considered himself a peaceful person, but a part of him wanted to finish the job for Mr. Milburn. *Wasn't that a normal way to look at it?*

It had been a heck of a seven days, what with Cathy breaking up on him, then pieces of bizarre information from Mitch, then the tragedy and now the aftermath.

Maybe because of all that, Pike let it loose Friday night at Stevenson, a light rain falling, very thin crowd. He threw for 5 TDs by halftime, his mechanics in synch, the ball going exactly where he wanted and with zip, and Hamilton stopped throwing in the second half and coasted to an easy win.

He checked his phone on the team bus home and there was a message from Mitch. He'd leave that alone tonight. He had worked up the guts to ask Alicia Guisti out tonight and she said okay, and he was going to pick her up as soon as he got back, nothing earth shattering, he was thinking maybe a little late night bowling would do the trick and kind of let everything unwind.

Chapter 21

Things went a little later with Alicia than he planned. Even though she was a beautiful girl, he was dead tired, and two rounds of bowling was enough.

But she had two parties she wanted to hit, so Pike went along with it. It was semi weird, how they played out. The first one was at Amos Stillman's house. Stillman was half a black guy. His dad was white, from Oklahoma, and the mom was a black woman who taught math at the JC, in Arborville.

Stillman was probably the best athlete on the team and he was Pike's primary receiver. He'd been getting some college recruiting interest, same as Pike. Supposedly Cal was interested.

Pike was hoping that could work out for him, get out of this hick town where there are almost no other black people. Stillman went with the flow, but he had to put up with plenty of bullshit, maybe not as much as if he weren't a stud football player but enough, and you never knew where it might come from and when. Pike and Stillman weren't close, but Pike admired him.

Country music was wailing away at Stillman's, which Pike supposed made sense (though when they got to Marty Clarke's party, the second one, Clarke had on all hard rap, so you'd think the whole thing would have somehow been reversed.)

Anyway, the big thing, when Pike and Alicia get there, Foxxe is at Stillman's party. Sitting there in a chair by himself, Rick Pardo and Jocelyn Roote fooling around with each other on the couch a few feet away.

Pike wanted to say something to Foxxe, but he thought he better observe the dude first. It became clear pretty quick that Foxxe was drunk off his ass.

At first Pike was sympathetic. Who wouldn't be trying to shut out the real world right now, and numb the pain?

But then a panic set in. Did this guy drive here himself?

Pike mentioned it to Alicia, but she was caught up talking to a bunch of people, and was working on a hefty glass of spiked punch herself and didn't register or seem to care about Foxxe's situation at the moment.

Pike went outside. The driveway was jammed with cars and there were a few parked on the side lawn, at funny angles. There were more parked along the street, and the fourth one down, a beat-up white Honda Civic, looked suspiciously like Foxe's.

Pike surveyed the situation. There was a light on here and there in the neighbors' houses, but it was after midnight and things were fairly quiet, and the stretch where Foxe's car was parked was pretty dark.

What would be the simplest way? He quietly tried the driver's door and it opened. People rarely locked their cars in Beacon, though if you had something new you at least thought about it, since once in a while a car would get lifted and it would be a big deal around town for a week or so.

Pike wondered, could he just pull out the ignition thing, where you stick the key? He tried, but there wasn't much to grip on to. He thought about finding a rock and smashing the ignition with it, but that seemed kind of messy and unpredictable, and maybe that'd cause some sort of reaction or explosion, *who the heck knows?*

The simplest solution, staring him right in the face he realized, was to break off the steering wheel . . . He grabbed it and pulled it toward him, and there was a snap, luckily not a very loud one, and the thing came off in his hands.

He slipped it under his windbreaker, gently closed the door, and walked it to his own vehicle which was further down the block. He opened the trunk, threw Foxe's steering wheel in, and shut the thing and went back to the party.

Pike didn't care too much for Alicia by now. She was slightly out of control, and flirting with a bunch of guys. He kept suggesting they head over to the second party, Marty Clarke's, but it took him an hour to get her out of there.

As they were leaving, Foxe was on his feet and wobbling out the door too. Pike thought it would be interesting to hang around outside, see how this would play out.

But Foxe was with another kid, Artie Conklin, and they turned the other way, UP the block, and before Pike knew it, they got in Conklin's car and drove away.

Alicia said, "What's wrong? Aren't we going?"

Pike stood there scratching his head. Several people had spilled out of the house now and had also watched Foxe go. No one said anything about his dad at the party, but now that he was gone everyone was talking about it.

Someone said, "Guy has a lot of nerve showing his face here, you know it?"

Someone else said, "C'mon you can't blame him. He didn't do nothing."

A third person said, "All's I know, if that prick drove here I would have blocked his car for sure."

The first one said, "You got that right. I would have gone a step further, smashed him in the face, then punctured all his tires . . . A-hole sitting there blitzed out of his mind, just like his old man . . . A damn shame Audie's dad didn't finish the job."

The Foxxe part was over and the crowd filtered back into the house. Pike wondered, could Foxxe have driven here, but then left his car when he'd had too much drink, and chosen to have Conklin take him home?

Or, much more likely now, was the white Honda Civic someone else's?

"Yeah," he said to Alicia, "we should get a move on, before Clarke's thing wraps up."

And he took her arm and hustled her as inconspicuously as he could to his car, and got out of there quick.

When they walked into the second party the Foxxe thing hit Pike front and center again, since Audrey was there, mingling, trying to keep a happy face.

After a while Pike noticed her in the family room with her friend Megan, looking a lot more subdued, and he sat down with them. It was probably out of line to bring up the subject, but he asked it anyway. "How's your dad?"

"Oh, he's good. Thank you . . . Not *really* good though . . . You know what I mean."

Pike's phone buzzed, and Jeez it was Cathy. He let it go, made some small talk with Audrey now, nothing more about the situation.

A few minutes later Mitch called. Pike was sure the two calls must be related, maybe this was an emergency or something, so he answered it.

"You got a minute?" Mitch said.

"Not really," Pike said. "But here I am."

"Okay now we got a development . . . I have a friend, runs another site, similar to mine. Not *that* similar actually, but he does have a section where people upload videos, that type of thing. Sometimes they comment."

"Come on," Pike said.

“Fine. So I cross-check our deal on their site, and there’s one item in particular. This guy in Texas, from everything he says, his case is looking very similar to yours . . . The mercury filling, the sudden onslaught of super strength.”

“Unh-huh.”

“But what he does, he puts two and two together, becomes suspicious the filling may something to do with it, which you have to give him credit for.”

“That it?”

“So he has it removed.”

“Oh,” Pike said, not sure he wanted the answer but asking, “What happened then?”

“He got weak. Weaker than before.”

“Was it . . . temporary? Or what?”

“We’re not sure. I’m trying to get a hold of him. But the implication was, it was several months since the removal, and he still hadn’t regained his previous strength.”

This was rough news, and what Pike suspected might happen if he tried to have his own filling removed. *That he would pay the price in some other way.*

And this was assuming he even bought in, which he was having plenty of trouble doing, that his own filling was causing all this.

But no matter what, it didn’t help to hear this. “Did anything else . . . go wrong?” he asked Mitch.

“You mean subsequent to the removal? Not that he mentioned. At least nothing that he was aware of.”

“How much weaker was he? . . . I mean, like a cancer victim or something?”

“I don’t have a handle on the degree, just yet. It sounded like he could live normally, but went from being the strongest guy in the pool to the weakest. Overnight.”

“The pool?”

“Just an expression.”

“Okay . . . is that it?”

“For now.”

“Did Cathy contact you at all? . . . My ex-girlfriend?”

“No she didn’t.”

Pike thanked him and put the phone away.

“Gosh,” Audrey said. “What was *that* all about, if you don’t mind my asking? It sounded quite intense.”

Pike looked across the couch at her. She was a sweet person, always had been, all the way back in first grade. There was an innocence and vulnerability about her, never more so than now.

Megan had gone somewhere and it was just the two of them, and Pike hated himself for not being truthful with her, but he couldn't.

"That was nothing," he said. "Just some football stuff, more or less."

"And Cathy was part of it?" Audrey said.

"Ah, yeah, I guess. This guy, he has kind of a scouting service . . . and I guess she sent him a video, or whatever."

"Wow . . . Does that mean you're thinking about playing football in college then?"

"That's just . . . way out there, at this point," Pike said. "But let's don't worry about me . . . What are *you* planning?" Realizing as soon as he blurted it out that it was a terrible question, and wanting to kick himself.

Audrey handled it. "Well I've been applying back east," she said.

"That's been my dream . . . Of course now . . ." her voice broke slightly and trailed off.

Pike felt as awkward as he ever had. He debated it for a moment, and then moved over next to her and held her hand. There was nothing to say, they just sat there.

All kinds of thoughts were swirling around in his head. The craziest one: If he could somehow take out the devil filling and go through the rest of his life weak, like the supposed dude in Texas--but have Audrey's mom be okay--he'd do it.

But obviously it didn't work that way.

Chapter 22

Pike got up around noon on Saturday. There was just the one text from Cathy still, no follow up. He thought at this point maybe he should let it ride, and not get back to her. It was something different than Mitch called about obviously, but if it were really important she'd try him again. *Wouldn't she?*

The business with the car was circulating around. It turned out to belong to Danny Crow, a junior, a basketball player. There'd apparently been a police report, which alarmed Pike for a second, but you couldn't worry about it now.

He was trying to think of a way he could take care of it. Like the kid going to the gym to shoot some baskets and he comes out and Pike has it back to normal. Except he didn't trust himself re-installing a steering wheel.

But then by the end of the afternoon it didn't matter, as the kid Crow posted a before-and-after picture, first the wheel missing and then everything repaired, him holding the new steering wheel with a big forced smile.

So someone didn't waste time, which was just as well. Pike would have to come up with a way to pay the kid back. Anonymously of course, now that the cops were involved.

Anyhow . . . you had another Saturday night in your face, and he was again girlfriend-less. The Alicia thing had been a mistake, for the most part, and that wasn't going anywhere. He could see his dad's point, from the other day, how there wasn't much going on around here and you took what you could.

Which tonight was essentially zippo.

Pike decided to go over to the high school and take a run. It was starting to get dark early, but it was nice out. The air was cold and fresh, and he started with some easy laps around the track. It was an odd feeling, being out here all solitary and no lights on and the parking lot empty and everything still and quiet. You could hear the sound of trucks from miles away, and a train in the distance too.

Contrast this to a Friday night game. The exhilaration of the crowd. The band, the cheerleaders, the dance team. The bright lights, especially this year after Hamilton improved them over the summer. Out on that field, it was temporary, everyone knew it, but for those couple hours it was the center of the universe.

Pike finished his run. It was a slow three miles but it felt good. He sat on the turf and stretched it out and then left the field. He'd only seen one person the whole time, some old guy walking his dog on the baseball diamond, which was adjacent.

No one was home in his house. He opened the fridge, stared in there for a while, checked the cabinets, and finally decided to make some buttered popcorn. He didn't know how to cook much of anything, but he had popcorn down. An air popper for the corn, and then you melted a stick of butter in small saucepan being careful not to burn it and then combined the whole thing in a big wooden bowl. Far superior to the movies, where the butter was fake.

He took the bowl of popcorn up to his room, showered and got comfortable, and settled in at the computer. He felt stupid, but *if you can't beat 'em, then maybe join 'em*. He began to google "materials in dental fillings" and "sources of amalgam fillings".

It was basically chaos, trying to come across any results that made sense. Mostly you had articles, about a thousand of them, telling you why mercury in fillings is bad. There were other articles challenging the first ones, saying that the mercury in modern fillings has been altered and is not dangerous anymore.

Pike didn't give a flying frig about any of that. Finally after sifting through several idiotic pages of results some blogger explained what was in the damn fillings.

Apparently they were made of half mercury, and half an alloy. The dentist mixes liquid mercury with the powdered alloy, it said, to make a putty. They put the putty in the tooth and it hardens.

The alloy is a combination of silver, tin and copper.

So . . . *whoopee, there you had it.*

It was after 10 and Pike was ticked off that he'd just wasted so much time. He'd never returned that call from Cathy, so what the hay . . . Maybe.

He thought about it for 30 seconds seconds and called her. It went to voice mail, which he already didn't like, but he left a message: "It's me. Just getting back to you. Hope you're good."

His first thought was where would she be on a Saturday night. Totally unfair, he knew, since on his end he hadn't wasted much time hooking up with Alicia. But still, sitting here now, his mind raced around.

He decided to call Alicia. It hadn't worked out last night, it was a definite mismatch, but you never know. She answered right away, a lot of noise in the background.

"Hey," Pike said.

“Hey you,” Alicia said. “I didn’t hear from you today.”

“So . . . I don’t know, you want to meet up, or something?”

“Well I would’ve,” she said, “but you’re a little late.”

Pike said he understood, and to have fun, and he figured that would close the door on him and Alicia. She was a player, and he knew that going in, and if she wanted to hang with someone else now, God bless her. Even though it killed him to admit it.

He heard his family come in and start banging around downstairs, and he cranked up the music in his room. He didn’t feel like socializing.

He lay on the bed and started re-reading some of the college recruiting letters he’d been getting. There were over 30 now. Mostly from schools he’d never heard of, a lot of them in Division 3. There were a few from higher profile programs though. San Jose State, Oregon State. University of Idaho. Colorado State.

Still, most of them had a form-letter feel to them, and Pike was guessing hundreds of guys around the country were getting the same letters. He asked Coach about this, and Coach told him yeah, but to keep his head down and keep playing hard, that playing for a small high school in a small conference was keeping him under the radar a bit, but that wouldn’t last.

He was focused on a paragraph in one of the letters that talked about how that school’s football program had ‘a long tradition of exemplary achievement, both on and off the playing field.’

Pike got a kick out of this, since last season there was a scandal at that school and some players got kicked off the team and expelled, along with the head coach and an assistant getting the axe too.

He was dozing off when the phone rang.

“Yep,” he said, clearing his throat.

“How are you?” It was Cathy.

“Jeez,” Pike said.

“Uh-oh,” Cathy said. “Are you mad I called?”

“No . . . I just didn’t expect it. I mean this late.” He checked the time, it close to 2 in the morning.

“I apologize then. I just wanted to let you know, I received something more from Reggie Riley, the man--”

“I got it, I know who we’re talking about.”

“Of course, then . . . He said something very odd.”

“*Said?* What, you’re speaking with him now? *Direct?*”

“Yes I am. He’s a nice man. There’s nothing to worry about in that regard, Pike.”

“Oh my God . . . Except he’s convinced we’ve been invaded by aliens . . . that kind of nice man.”

“Do you want to hear it or not?”

“Fine.”

“What Reggie said, was when his brother Billy was in basic training for the Marines, somewhere in Carolina I believe . . .”

“That’d be Parris Island,” Pike said. “South Carolina.”

“Yes, there then,” Cathy said. “The essence of it is, he said his brother went back in time.”

“Oh no,” Pike said. “Here we go. Can you stop with this lunatic? . . . Please?”

“Well, I simply wanted to inform you. I’m not intending to judge, one way or the other.”

“Back in time, HOW exactly?”

“I don’t know much more, and I’m not sure Reggie does either. Apparently his brother told him he did it twice, once back a year, once back five years.”

“Yeah. In his mind.”

“That could be,” she said. “Although Mr. Gillmore has actually brought up time travel in class.”

“Is that right . . . we’ll he’s a nutcase too.” Pike had Gillmore for sophomore biology. He was teaching an astronomy class this year, which Cathy was taking, a new thing at school. The guy looked like a homeless person, wore the same worn out sport coat every day, and had a beard and long hair.

Cathy said, “So anyhow . . . goodnight then?”

“Thanks,” Pike said, not wanting her to go. What he really wanted to ask was where she was tonight, until 2 in the morning, but he knew it was none of his damn business.

“And I heard about you and Alicia,” she said. “I’m happy for you.”

Pike started to say something, but it would only sound stupid, so he thanked her again and hung up and tried to go to sleep.

He woke up at 4:30, a headache coming on now, and he turned on the light and started scrolling around about the insane possibility someone could time travel.

Chapter 23

Pocatello, Idaho

September 30th 2016

For Dani Andriessen, things were uneven with Marcus after the knocking-him-off-the-couch incident.

On the one hand, he seemed different. There was a kind of wide-eyed respect for her that she felt at times. She was convinced he wasn't fully aware of what happened that night when he was forcing himself on her, drunk as a skunk, and she flicked him off and he temporarily lost consciousness.

But she suspected that subconsciously he sort of got it. And he treated her more cautiously, like a new pit bull you've just adopted from the shelter that you're concerned may be unpredictable.

The other side of it was, when he was fully blitzed he could be the same despicable human being. This happened less, fortunately, since the couch incident, and their summer had gone relatively well, but she never could fully relax as to how he might come home.

Unfortunately, there'd been another incident today. Like last time, his liquor speaking for him, it started with him trying talk her into it, and when she ignored him he reached across and ripped open her blouse, as she was trying to eat a sandwich at the kitchen table.

Dani stood up in a fury, spun Marcus around, and without giving it any thought she applied a choke hold like she had seen on television in mixed martial arts matches. You didn't choke off the person's airway like one would think, you merely restricted the carotid artery, which flowed to the brain, and the victim passed out within about eight seconds.

Dani had actually researched this move and studied it on YouTube prior to her 'revelation' . . . as she liked to think of it now . . . which was the day she started smoking her bike in the spin class and first learned that she had this super strength.

Learning the rear choke seemed like a good idea, a technique she might have to rely on at some point in her life in a worst case scenario.

Anyhow, this time in the apartment, in her impulsive state of anger, she worried she might break Marcus's neck while she was at it, and she was able to restrain herself enough to

simply pass him out. Once that happened though, and she felt him go limp, she didn't have any problem letting him drop, and he crashed down pretty hard, which was reasonably satisfying.

Tonight she wasn't going to wait around for him to wake up and ask *what just happened*. She got her keys and was out the door as he was starting to groan and spew out a few incoherent words.

Dani had gone to a therapist after the first incident. Her own take on it, she told the therapist, was Marcus was a Doctor Jekyll-and-Mr. Hyde personality.

The therapist didn't comment on that one way or the other, but she explored past relationships, and family dynamics in Dani's house growing up. It was pretty obvious there was a pattern. Her dad hadn't been all that different from Marcus. Great guy, life of the party, huge heart, all around fun person.

But then the drinking, and the nightmare personality reversals . . . Her boyfriends before Marcus were variations on the theme. There were differences, and they didn't all come home blitzed, but the deeper issues were consistent at the core.

At one point the therapist, who was an older woman named Gail with a New York accent and a savvy way about her, asked Dani the specifics of how she smacked Marcus so hard.

Dani was very tempted to open up about the whole thing. It was an awful secret to bear, and it was ongoing, with not a single answer to how she acquired her outlandish strength, despite her best efforts scouring the internet and even the university library.

But of course it would be a disastrous mistake to confide in Gail, or anyone else, so she told her it must have been the perfect storm of a collision, his face coming forward and her hand reaching out, and Gail seemed satisfied with the explanation.

This time, tonight, after the second one, the chokehold incident, Dani got in her car and drove up Yellowstone Boulevard toward Chubbuck. There were supermarkets and strip malls on both sides, and people going about their business, moving casually in heat of the evening, eastern Idaho with a warm spell in late September.

Eventually the road slimmed from four lanes to two, and you started heading out in the country, and you passed farms and fresh hay being cut, and it was a different world.

Dani remembered a regional park somewhere around here, and she found it and drove in and parked, and there was a girls' softball game going on. She took a seat in the stands and

called Gail. That seemed prudent. She'd had six sessions with her after the first incident, and then stopped.

Gail, who was officially known as Dr. Stern, had called her back a few times, suggesting that in her opinion there was more work to do. Dani had her antennae up, knowing that therapists had to make money just like everyone else, and they had a vested interest in drawing out a patient's therapy for as long as possible.

At the same time, she never got the impression that Gail was in it for the money, and she felt those calls to her were sincere and from the heart. Still, she politely told Gail that she felt she had things under control, and that the sessions had helped and thank you. Gail disagreed and pointed to specifics as to why, but Dani held firm.

Now though, sitting here in the stands at the softball game, she couldn't reach her. A recording said simply the number had been disconnected. Dani looked for a new one and couldn't find anything. She remembered Gail mentioning her husband worked for the university, so she tried searching it that way. She found the husband, a humanities professor it turned out, but on the department website it announced that he'd retired following the spring semester.

This wasn't good news. Dani thought of Gail as a misfit around here, a kind of in-your-face Jewish lady from the east, and now things were more clear, that the husband's teaching job was what probably brought them to Pocatello, and now that it was over they were gone.

Dani watched the game end, found a sports bar and had a bite to eat, and debated going home. It was a Friday night, though, there was nowhere she had to be in the morning, so why put yourself through that?

She remembered the Super 8 up on the hill near the medical center, where her friend Josie stayed a couple times while visiting from Indiana, and it seemed like a good place to check in.

The rate wasn't bad, everything was pretty fresh, and Dani remembered she luckily had some gym clothes in her car, so she changed and went into the hot tub.

There was plenty to think about. She was going to leave Marcus now, she was convinced she had the strength. It would be hard, but at least school had started back up and she could immerse herself in being the best teacher she could. And she could find other activities to fill the void . . . Maybe take an art class at night, maybe join a discussion group . . . Weren't there Meetups now for all those things?

Ten minutes into the hot tub soak, Dani's mind started to relax. *It was only a bump in the road. Things happened for a reason. She was a worthy person.* Though she'd love to know the *happened for a reason* part of her physical 'revelation', but that was beside the point right now.

Even watching TV was better here. You had all these extra channels and the bed was pretty darn comfortable. The most refreshing part of course, you didn't have to worry about anyone walking in, or how they might act.

Checkout time Saturday morning was 11, and Dani milked it right to the end. First she went down to the lobby for breakfast, and it was an impressive spread, with Danish pastries and make-your-own waffles, and assorted fruits and pretty good coffee actually.

She took a walk up into the hills where they'd built a cluster of luxury houses, and she pictured people's lives up here, the spaciousness of the homes and the commanding views, very different than the life she knew.

She had a half-hour before checkout and she squeezed in one more hot tub session, along with some laps in the pool, and headed home to South 5th Street.

The fortunate thing, Marcus had an indoor soccer league he played in on Saturdays, and he'd mentioned that this week they were playing a tournament in Boise.

So that would occupy him most of the day. Which was good, because she frankly needed the time to figure out the best way to tell him it was over . . . And to brace for his reaction.

Dani turned the key and was alarmed to hear a college football game blasting out of the radio in the kitchen. She cautiously took one step into the apartment and waited, and then called his name. Marcus didn't answer. The bedroom door was open she peaked in. The bed was made nice and neat, there were no clothes laying around, in fact the apartment overall looked cleaned up.

Dani put her keys down and laid her purse on the table and closed the front door. *Thank God.* Marcus had obviously just left radio on. Either by accident, or maybe for security, *which wasn't the worst thing, since he'd be gone all day and he didn't know when I'd be back.*

There was a muffled sound from down the hall, and for a moment Dani thought it was street noise reverberating through the apartment.

Then Marcus appeared coming out of the bathroom. He looked badly disheveled, like hadn't slept, and was wearing a sleeveless t-shirt and a tattered pair of long johns, and his feet were bare. He was holding a glass bottle of liquor in his left hand.

It took Dani a moment longer than it should have, since she was in a state of denial, to see that in his right hand he had a gun.

She knew a little bit about guns, having grown up with a dad and uncle who were avid outdoorsmen. Her dad was always trying to get her to come along, and occasionally she did. He taught her firearm safety and how to take a weapon apart and clean it.

Dani would think about this later, and would be surprised how calm she was as Marcus staggered along the hall toward her. It was interesting that she mentally took the time to identify the weapon. It looked like a Taurus 444. You typically used one for a backup, when you were hunting deep in bear territory. To a novice it would resemble a typical street handgun, but it was different.

As Marcus got closer he smiled at her, strange and extremely scary . . . At this moment, not remotely the person she knew.

She flashed on her dad once pulling a gun on her mom in the garage, when they were getting ready to go play Bingo. None of the three of them ever spoke about it, and her mom, as far as Dani could tell, woke up the next day and went about her and the family's business like nothing had happened.

Marcus said, "Hiya Babe."

For whatever reason, Dani focused on a drop kick as what might save her. It was a weird notion to have pop into her head. It seemed like wrestling was always on in the house when she was growing up. It was fake obviously, her dad was always pointing that out and laughing about it, but there were good athletes in it and some of the moves were amazing.

There was one wrestler she particularly enjoyed, partly because he was dark-skinned but had a long blond mane, and she had a bit of crush on him. Eeson 'De-Tox' Alexander. His signature move was the drop kick, where he'd fly up into the air, deliver the blow and then land on his back. The blow always either won the bout outright, or at least turned it around from when it looked completely bleak for De-Tox.

Marcus was about eight feet away, waving the gun casually. He said, "What? . . . I said to you, 'Hi Babe' . . . Don't believe I heard you answer me." His upper lip started to curl back.

Dani visualized it for a split second, felt she had it, and leapt toward him, bringing both legs to her chest and then thrusting them forward in an explosion of power and fury.

Something else she dwelled on later, when she thought back on it, the amused look on Marcus's face right up to the moment of contact, like was watching a circus act.

On impact, Dani could feel her feet rip into his chest, tearing through the skin, shattering the ribs and crushing his organs.

She remembered later thinking she should have been surprised, but that she wasn't.

Marcus flew into the south living room wall and stayed there. He was a couple feet off the ground. He had obliterated the sheetrock. The wall studs were exposed, except instead of being the normal 16 inches apart one was missing. That was where Marcus was wedged in, between two studs with the center one knocked out.

Amazingly Marcus hadn't dropped the gun. It occurred to Dani he must have had his finger wrapped around the trigger guard and it somehow stayed in place.

There was a knock on the door. Dani knew she couldn't *not* answer it.

The kid from the apartment next door was standing there, nice guy, college student. Dani was pretty sure the kid had heard Marcus and her arguing a few times when it got heated, which probably woke him up once or twice, but he was diplomatic enough to let it go and never say anything.

Someone else, a woman Dani didn't recognize, appeared as well, with her dog, asking if everything was okay. She was probably just walking down the block. Dani supposed it must have been pretty loud.

Dani didn't let them in, but asked them please call an ambulance, and not panic, but that she injured her boyfriend very badly and is afraid she may have killed him.

The kid and the dog woman got out of there fast, and Dani called 911 as well, in case they hadn't. She left her door open, considered turning off the radio where the announcer was still yelling out the play-by-play of the game, but decided to leave it alone, and she sat down at the kitchen table and waited. *What else could you do?*

Two uniform guys came in with guns drawn and handcuffed her and sat her on the floor against the couch. After a while two detectives showed up and they took the cuffs off.

Marcus was DOA, they way they kept putting it, and the police sent away the ambulance, and a crew with **Forensics** on the backs of their shirts came in and tried to go to work. It wasn't easy, Marcus wedged up and in there in the awkward position, and Dani couldn't help wondering if it might be at all tricky to extricate him.

Pretty soon the detectives' questions were coming at her from all angles, and she responded as best she could. *He was moving toward me with the gun, and . . . with a burst of adrenaline I suppose . . . I reacted and kicked him backwards.*

There was a mean detective and a friendly one, which was how Dani was pretty sure it worked. "Unh-huh," the mean one said. "And stuck him in the wall then . . . You're a pretty hot lady, you don't mind my saying. Plenty feminine and all.

The friendly one cleared his throat. "Ma'am, what Buzz is getting at--We're wondering, doesn't what you're saying happened, seem out of character? I mean, if you were us, wouldn't you think so?"

"It was an abusive relationship," Dani said, keeping it frank. "I'd finally made my mind up that yes I had the strength to break up with him."

"Way it looks, that ain't the only strength you had," the mean one said.

"All's we're saying," the nice one said, "you had to have some help here. Will you at least grant us that?"

Putting on his best Sunday smile. "I mean let's all use a modicum of common sense," he said, motioning his head toward Marcus, but neither of them glancing over there. Dani sensed that even these veteran detectives were cringing slightly at the view.

"I can understand your impression," she said. "But as I've been telling you, I surprised myself as well . . . Again, all I can chalk it up to, is a massive survival surge. Where I feared for my life . . . I'm not sure what else I can give you."

The detectives conferred privately for a minute and then the nice one said she'd have to come to the station with them, no handcuffs, no charges, but to please cooperate.

Riding in the back of their black sedan, unmarked, Dani wondered did she actually need a lawyer. And if so, who would she call?

But at the police station everything seemed casual, they asked her what she wanted to drink, and she said coffee please, though what they brought her had been sitting for a while.

They ushered her into a room with a long table and a leather couch, that didn't feel like an interrogation room, and they had her fill out some paperwork, which to Dani appeared boilerplate and routine. Essentially she was making a police report.

Then another detective, or maybe the chief one, who knows, came in and asked her the questions the other two had asked, but he spun them slightly differently.

At this point Dani suspected they were trying to trip her up, get her to change something in her story, and she politely declined to answer any more questions. An hour later they let her go, and a uniform cop drove her home.

Marcus's death was on the news that night. Dani watched carefully, and was relieved there was nothing graphic or detailed about Marcus being shot into the wall like he had been. Dani thought about it and realized the police were holding back details, which was probably quite typical where a case was still wide open.

She checked online Sunday morning and several local papers picked it up, but it was all the same one story, written by Lincoln Paul of the *Bannock County News*.

Pocatello Man Killed in Alleged Domestic Violence Incident

October 2nd, 2016 - A 28-year-old Pocatello man died Saturday in what police describe as a domestic argument that escalated into violence.

Marcus Roberts, of 128 South 5th Street, was pronounced dead at 2:47 pm in the apartment he shared with his girlfriend, Dani Andriessen.

No one has been charged, according to police.

During the alleged dispute, Roberts brandished a firearm, authorities said.

Andriessen then reportedly kicked Roberts in the chest and he allegedly fell backward and never regained consciousness.

Roberts was a 2012 ISU graduate and most recently worked as a computer coder for Ark Tech Systems in Chubbuck.

Andriessen is a 2nd year kindergarten teacher at Oak Grove School in Blackfoot.

A Pocatello police spokesman said their investigation is ongoing.

Nothing terrible there, fairly tame in fact, except Dani didn't like the *ongoing* part. She knew the police were simply doing their job, and they were obviously having trouble wrapping their minds around Marcus getting from point A to point B, but still.

There was a family from last year, from school, that Dani became friendly with. They told her their son loved being in her class every day, and they gave her a little gift at the end of the school year. The husband was an attorney, Dani had no idea what kind, but she looked him up and gave him a call, and he generously came right over.

The attorney, Austin, asked her to re-tell it, listened intently and said he knew someone 'downtown', as he put it, and to not worry, they should be able to resolve it on Monday.

The last thing he asked Dani, the key to the whole business he said, would she be willing to re-enact that drop kick that finished off Marcus?

Dani said she would, and Austin shook her hand and left.

Monday afternoon they were back in the same room at the police station, and the mean and the nice detective grabbed the two ends of the long table and moved it out of the way, and they set up a padded dummy, which Dani guessed they used in their own defense training.

"So then," the nice detective said, "May as well let fly ma'am, whenever you're ready."

Dani looked at Austin and he nodded. She wanted it to look convincing, but nothing superhuman, so she reined it in just enough, and she left her feet and delivered a solid blow to the chest of the dummy, the thing skittering into the near wall. Though it didn't obliterate any sheetrock or wall studs.

"Not bad," the mean detective said. "Although the result ain't quite the same, is it?"

Austin interjected, that when you factor in an adrenaline rush with a victim who fears for her life, you get an exponential degree of force.

The detectives were acting unconvinced. So Dani said to the mean one, "If you'd like to take the place of the dummy, we can try it again . . . I believe I can recreate my mindset better with an actual human in front of me . . . Especially if he has a gun."

The two men looked at each other. It was clear they wanted no part of the scene from the apartment, whether they believed exactly what happened or not.

The nice detective said to Austin, "We're good here, I believe. Y'all can go."

Austin said, "You believe?"

"Yeah, we got classic self defense," the detective said. "We were looking for something . . . extenuating . . . but I don't believe we're about to find anything."

"So that's it, then?" Dani said.

"You got it," the mean detective said, winking at her. "Was a tough deal you went through . . . No hard feelings . . . You did good."

When they were outside Austin smiled and said, "That was effective, your offering to demonstrate directly on the one guy."

"Well, it seemed more natural that way," Dani said, "and thank you so much for your help."

What she left out, which she couldn't help thinking, was if that detective had actually taken her up on it, things could have gotten interesting in there.

Chapter 24

Between third and fourth period on Monday Pike took a swig from the outdoor water fountain and when he lifted up there was a hand on his shoulder, firm, and as he turned to look, a fist caught him squarely in the mouth.

“You little piece of pond scum,” Jack Hannamaker said. “Right in my face!”

Pike was dabbing at his mouth with the back of his wrist and thinking, *What?*

Then he remembered sitting in the family room with Audrey Friday night at Marty Clarke’s house, holding her hand. Someone obviously fed it back to Hannamaker. It wasn’t at all accurate, what this crazed dude was worried about, not even close, but it would be pointless to try to explain that. In fact the guy would probably throw another right hand.

So Pike walked away . . . Or tried to.

But Hannamaker pursued him from behind.

Pike sometimes wore hats to school, baseball type caps. A few teachers made you take them off in class, but most didn’t care. Today he had on one of his favorites, a 49ers hat that a defensive tackle he admired, Jason Smith, had signed on the underside of the bill. It was from a few years ago, his dad had taken him to a game in Santa Clara when the new stadium first opened, and they waited afterwards outside the player parking lot, and Smith signed his cap.

That particular hat, he tried to take care of it, he didn’t wear it to school much. Maybe if Hannamaker had known that, he would have understood. But Jack came up behind him, pulled the hat off, threw it down and stomped on it, and then spit on it.

Jack started to add, “And I better not be hearing---” when Pike whirled and delivered a spinning backhand to the side of Hannamaker’s head, and you could hear bones fragmenting like the sound you might get if you shattered a thin glass globe with a hammer.

Jack ended up in the hospital, down the hall actually from Foxe’s dad who was still recovering from the incident with Mr. Milburn. They were going to suspend Pike, but then by the end of the period a few kids came forward who saw it, and it was clear Jack was the instigator. Pike prayed that would be the end of it, though word spread quick and people were coming up to him in the hall the rest of the day, saying *DAMN*.

Pike was in the living room with his dad and little brother Bo watching the Monday night game, Cleveland and Pittsburgh, a light snow falling on TV, when Audrey called.

Pike went upstairs to take it.

“I feel awful,” she said.

“Nah,” he said. “No big deal . . . I just wish I could hang onto my temper better.”

“My goodness,” she said, “from all accounts, anyone would have reacted that way . . . I mean it, Jack should be ashamed of himself, you didn’t sign up for that.”

“Well how’s your dad?” Pike said.

“Thank you for asking. He’s home . . . He has legal issues now obviously . . . I try to not think too far ahead.”

Pike said, “You know something? You’re a darn good kid.”

“Kid?”

“Daughter. And yeah, kid too.”

“You’re funny.”

“They say how long . . . Jack’ll be in there?” Pike said.

“Yes,” Audrey said. “At least a week. Maybe more. Apparently it depends on how soon they can schedule the surgery.”

“Hmm . . . In that case . . . would you feel like going out this weekend?”

There was a silence. Pike was certain he’d stepped way over the line, and that this development didn’t sit well at all with good, wholesome Audrey, especially with her tragedy still sickeningly fresh.

“Sure,” she said.

“You’re kidding,” Pike said.

“All right, forget it then.” There was a slight playfully devilish touch to the way she said it, and it was the wrong time to be thinking about it, but he couldn’t help wonder what else might be underneath the surface.

On Tuesday Pike tried a couple times to stop in and speak to Mr. Gillmore, the astronomy teacher, but Mr. Gillmore was tied up and suggested tomorrow morning before first period.

It killed Pike to get up a half hour early but he did, and he met Mr. Gillmore in the teachers' lounge on the third floor. Pike couldn't believe what a mess it was, newspapers and magazines strewn all over the place, plus some used beverage cups with straws sticking up out of them, and a couple of jackets laying there on the floor, like little kids in elementary school forget to bring home. *Jeez.*

Mr. Gillmore was drinking what smelled like a strong cup of black coffee. "Not sure if you remember me," Pike said. "Gillette? Sophomore biology?"

"Of course I do," Gillmore said. "I don't forget many students, and it's always a pleasure when they come back, as you are doing. As I recall, you were a nice boy, respectful, a bit of a class joker, and an indifferent student. Which is fine."

"That's the polite way of saying I got a C, I guess," Pike said.

"Oh I've long maintained that grades at the senior high school level, and even in college and beyond, are quite unnecessary. We need to re-think our approach."

"That'll never happen though, will it," Pike said.

Mr. Gillmore liked that and nodded. "Doubtful indeed . . . But if our young leaders step forward--and I'm including you in this grouping--we can effect gradual, if not dramatic change."

Pike fiddled with a loose pencil. "Sounds good," he said.

Mr. Gillmore said, "But that's not why you've come in, I don't suppose."

"No . . . Uh, sir, my question would be . . . Can we travel back in time . . . even though you never hear of anyone doing it."

The teacher lit a cigarette. "Don't tell anyone I'm smoking," he said. "Now the question you pose, it's a most interesting one of course. There is evidence that even primitive man pondered the same concepts on some level . . . It's part of the human condition, I'm afraid."

"I'm more wondering about *today* . . . scientifically, or even some other way . . . Ridiculous to think anyone really could, though. Right?"

Gillmore took his time. "I'm afraid it's not for me to interpret *could* or *couldn't*, Pike . . . Suffice it to say, there's a segment of science now that is looking hard at the concept of interdimensional space. It would logically follow, then, that interdimensional time is conceivable."

“Fine, whatever . . . Bottom line. Can anyone cross into those . . . other dimensions, then, is my big question I guess.”

“That is one theoretical belief, yes it is,” the teacher said.

“So . . . but just because interdimensional time is possible,” Pike said, “what makes them think we can, like, tap *into* it?”

“You make an astute point. Who knows, given the radical pace at which physical science is progressing, we may indeed gain some of these answers in your lifetime.”

Pike was frustrated. “But forgetting all that,” he said, “how about *you personally*, if someone put a gun to your head, not for real but you know what I mean . . . you believe in that shit?”

“I do,” Gillmore said. “Not as eminently logical as the existence of *other civilizations* and so on, but I believe our ability to venture back in time, and possibly forward as well, is substantial.”

Pike let out a big, built-up exhale. “Now you’re touching on something else too,” he said. “What, you think those other civilizations, they can visit us?”

“Absolutely . . . and not to add too many layers of complexity, but there are those who theorize that our own species, from the distant future, has done just that.”

Holy shit, what a nutcase this dude is turning out to be. “Hold on now,” Pike said. “You kinda lost me there . . . if we could just deal with the first part . . . Saying there *were* civilizations out there--which seems totally unlikely--how the heck could they ever get *here*?”

The teacher smiled. “I like your spunk. Let me insert also what a pleasure it is to have a student be passionate about these universal questions, when you have clearly developed the curiosity on your own, and nothing to do with a class, or a paper, or worse, a college application.”

“What does *that* mean?” Pike said.

“Oh, I’ve had students from time to time stop in during office hours and discuss scientific issues beyond the scope of the class . . . I can tell when their heart is not quite in it, however. Not surprisingly, the student later asks me to provide a letter of recommendation for a college application.”

“That’s not a bad strategy actually,” Pike said. “If I were college material I’d try that too.”

They both laughed a little. “You are of course,” Gillmore said, “college material.”

“I’m honestly not . . . But now with football, I have a shot . . . I’m getting letters from schools, scholarship offers maybe. Just not sure what I want to do about it.”

“I see . . . meaning?”

“I may just want to be . . . a regular guy. Does that make sense?”

“It certainly does. And being an irregular guy makes sense as well.”

Oh boy. “Anyhow . . .,” Pike said.

“Yes, where were we?” the teacher said. “Your question was regarding the ease of interplanetary, or even intergalactic travel . . .”

Mr. Gillmore’s phone rang and he answered. “Mary stop yelling,” he said into the phone. “Oh yes? Well you go fuck yourself too.”

He put his hand over the mouthpiece and told Pike he was sorry about the language, but he needed to take this, and Pike picked up his stuff and waved a thank you, though he wasn’t sure what he was thanking him *for*, and got on with his day.

Chapter 25

Hamilton was playing Curtis on Saturday, a rare afternoon game, and then they had an off week, a bye, and then one more game, at home, before the sectional playoffs. Which they were already penciled into, probably even if they managed to screw it up royally these last couple games, which was unlikely.

They were looking good at 5 and 2. They'd lost their opening two, but those were against outside opponents and didn't count as league games. Then, starting with the Bellemeade game, they'd gone undefeated, all in CFC play. Pike supposed it would be nice all around if they could run the table.

Coach Geddes hadn't directly singled out Pike at practice on Monday, with the Hannamaker incident still on the front burner from that morning, but he did warn the team during a water break how they need to *keep their poise*, on and off the field.

Tuesday had been practice as normal, but Wednesday, the day Pike met with Mr. Gillmore, Coach took him aside and told him if he heard one more unfavorable thing he'd be suspended from the team, he didn't give a rat's ass how well he was throwing the ball.

By this point a rumor had circulated that it was Pike who broke the steering wheel off the basketball kid's car, Cox, and Coach was likely factoring that in. Not to mention the fight in the backyard with Foxe.

Pike kept quiet and nodded his head. He could respect Coach in a way, if he was willing to maybe lose a game while suspending a good player on principle. Though Pike doubted Coach's principles would go so far as to keep him out of a playoff game. But the man was right, *why keep pushing it?*

That night he called Mitch.

"Anything?" Pike said.

"Not much. How've you been?"

Pike didn't feel a need to tell him about hospitalizing Hannamaker. "So-so," he said. "You hear anything else on that Texas guy . . . he's still . . . alive and everything. Right?"

"Oh yes," Mitch said, "I've checked in on that. Guy's name is Tim. No obvious improvement in strength, but no further appreciable decline either."

"This is a dumb question," Pike said.

“No such thing.”

“Well what’d they do with that filling they took out? I mean do they just throw ‘em away in a case like that? . . . Or what.”

“Believe me, it’s something I’m pursuing,” Mitch said. “Normally yes, they are disposed of along with the normal medical waste, the same as someone who had a tooth extracted, or part of a gum cut away in a procedure.”

“Ah c’mon,” Pike said.

“In this case, it’s unclear right now what happened to it.”

“Oh great . . . And why is that?”

“Just a feeling I have. Tim was slightly vague, when I brought it up.”

“What--you think he may held onto it?”

“There is that possibility.”

Pike said, “So ask him what happens when he puts it back in his mouth . . . Or holds it in his hand, or whatever . . . Ask him like you already know he has it, and see what he says.”

“That’s pretty good,” Mitch said. “Something else I’m seeing . . . sounds like you may be buying in after all.”

“Let’s not get carried away,” Pike said. “I’ll admit I did look up what was in the damn things . . . Just to educate myself.”

“Fair enough. No need to admit it, but you’re wondering the same thing I am. Was there something different in this one?”

Pike didn’t want to go there, so he said, “All you UFO believers and what-not . . . going back in time part of all that too?”

“Interesting you apply that part of it now, Pike. Where’d that come from?”

He didn’t want to tell Mitch for now about Cathy’s latest conversation with Reggie Riley. He said, “You say *that part of it*, like they’re connected.”

“I believe they are. Some alien travelers observing and/or visiting the earth may indeed be we humans, from the future. At least that’s one theory.”

“Oh my God,” Pike said, but this was sounding eerily like something Mr. Gillmore mentioned too.

“Of course the theories abound,” Mitch said. “I’m sure you’ve been following the Hubble Telescope. We are consistently detecting earth-like planets now, and their guide stars which aren’t nearly as distant as we once believed.”

“Yeah, yeah . . . Just work on finding out about that filling, will you?”

Before Mitch could answer, Pike said, "I apologize . . . Stuff's been going on . . . I wouldn't want to bore you with it."

"Understood completely," Mitch said. "And no offense taken, and there never will be . . . I'll catch you later son."

Could that be the key to the whole frigging thing? Pike wondered. Some doofus in Texas who may be keeping a disgusting old metal filling wrapped in Kleenex in his top drawer?

The Curtis game went fine Saturday. It was on the road, 70 miles away, but a healthy amount of Hamilton students showed up. Curtis was stuck with a little guy trying to guard Amos Stillman, and Pike could have completed it there every single play, but there was a point where you don't want to be a bunch of jerks and rub it in. Even so, Hamilton won by 26.

Pike was nervous about going out with Audrey that evening. It was a different feeling than he had on first-time dates in the past. He knew it had to do with the tragedy, that it was way too early for Audrey to be thinking clearly.

He was second-guessing himself. Not on account of the Jack Hannamaker thing, Pike was fine with that, stepping in for the guy who got what was coming to him. But was he taking advantage of Audrey in some way?

He rang the bell and her dad answered, Mr. Milburn, which was already a rough start. What could you say to him? Mr. Milburn was courteous, and Pike thinking he was amazingly composed considering the situation, and he sat Pike down in the living room while they waited for Audrey. Hailey stuck her head in for a moment and said hi.

Mr. Milburn asked Pike about school, and football, and how his parents were, just like a normal, pleasant father might do, who didn't have a wife who got murdered two weeks ago.

Audrey soon appeared, dressed simply but looking great, Pike decided, and a burst of fragrance radiated off of her. They said goodbye to Mr. Milburn and as they were out the door he called after them to *stay safe*, which Pike knew made sense but still gave him a bit of the creeps.

They decided they were both hungry and Pike told her pick anywhere she'd like, though he hoped she'd go for a moderate place since he didn't have all that much money on him. She

suggested a taqueria, over on Edison Street, and he was down with that. One of his favorite restaurants, big portions and cheap.

They finished and were heading to the car, Pike not sure what was next, just let her call the shots, and Audrey said she wouldn't mind taking a walk.

So they went down Edison to the end, where it teed into Oakwood, and they followed that a mile or so, an old-fashioned wide street, modest well-kept houses, until they came to the river.

“Dang,” Pike said. “It’s really flowing. I haven’t been down here in a bunch of years.”

Audrey said, “Yes, I’m so thankful for the rain last year. It was getting kind of dicey there, the drought.”

“Your dad’s a heck of nice man,” Pike said.

“Thank you, he really is.”

“It’s none of my business, but I can’t help thinking it . . . part of me honestly wishes he’d finished off Mr. Foxxe.”

Chapter 26

Anthem, Arizona

October 23rd, 2016

Lucy Jastrow was riding her bicycle to the community center to meet her friend Gertrude and have Sunday brunch.

There were things she didn't like about living in Anthem, but this was one of the perks. It was flat and relatively safe, in that there weren't many cars to contend with. You could leave your house and pick one of three or four routes, depending how much exercise you were up for. Of course to Lucy the tract houses all looked the same, so whichever route you chose, it became confusing sometimes to navigate back in the end and find your own house.

This was one of the negatives, she supposed, how plastic it was here. Not much character, on the surface no real individuality, everything planned and organized and squeaky-clean. Right down to the manicuring of the the fake-grass putting green.

Lucy had moved here two years ago, from New Braunfels, Texas. Her son Matt convinced her. He lived in Phoenix, forty five minutes south of Anthem, which put the grandkids close, and that was a perk. The other part, she knew, was Matt, plus her daughter Faye who lived in New Jersey, didn't completely trust her any more being so isolated out there in the Texas hill country.

Adding to why they were concerned about her, Lucy was convinced, was her fascination with UFO's. It made them uneasy. She hadn't dwelled much on the subject for decades, though the childhood incident with her dad was in her head, on some level, every day.

Then six years ago when Craig left her for another woman, named Stella, who was in fact at one time her best friend, Lucy had quite a bit of trouble sleeping, and frequently woke up in the middle of the night.

She discovered a talk show on AM radio, way down at the end of the dial, where they focused very little on politics and news of the day, and mostly on the strange and off-beat, which included unexplained phenomena in the skies.

In fact Lucy was tempted to call in a few times, when something the host or a guest said really hit home.

One subject that came up frequently was a claim that a UFO crashed in Roswell in the late 1940's, a couple hundred miles from Hillsdale, where her grandpa lived and where she and her dad had their experience in 1956.

A Roswell crash didn't make a lot of sense on the surface. First of all, if they were able to travel between stars, or maybe even galaxies, how unlikely would it be for something to happen, weatherwise or mechanically, when they reached Earth's atmosphere, that would cause them to crash-land?

Except for the way it was handled. First you had newspaper articles telling the world a flying saucer had hit. Then the next day the army issues a statement that no, what crashed was a weather balloon.

Fine, newspapers make mistakes. But . . . if a simple weather balloon fell to earth, what was the army doing there at all then, sealing off the crash site?

Anyhow, these were the type of questions from the late-night radio program that got Lucy stimulated. So yes, she probably did talk about UFO's to whoever would listen. After all, she didn't have that much going on otherwise. But Matt and Faye didn't like this, they called it an obsession, and Lucy suspected they feared she was turning paranoid and irrational.

So she gave in, and here she was in Palm Breeze Manor in Anthem, Arizona. Your HOA fees got you three giant pools, golf if you wanted it, plus tennis and pickleball, a rec center with about a thousand exercise machines, and classes and outings and planned activities up the wazoo.

Lucy didn't partake in much of it. She liked to ride her bike and take walks, and observe people without committing to anything. One good thing was she liked the heat. Even the summers didn't particularly bother her.

Today was pretty typical fall weather. High of 86, just a few thin wisps of clouds to the west. And dry, that was for sure.

She parked her bicycle and headed inside the community center. They had three restaurants--a traditional bacon and eggs griddle, an Asian place that ran the gamut from sushi to Panda Express-type Chinese noodles to Vietnamese soup, which was all tasty though Lucy doubted it was very authentic, and a seafood restaurant.

Which is where she was meeting Gertrude, *The Sandpiper*.

Except that when Lucy gave her name to the hostess, they walked her way back to the rear, and then into a banquet room, where about a million people burst out with 'Happy

Birthday!', and little blow horns sounded and there was confetti and then people started singing to her, and Lucy found herself thoroughly embarrassed by the whole thing.

"Well Happy 65th Mom," Faye said, planting a kiss on her cheek. Lucy's official birthday wasn't until Wednesday, but either way a simple lunch with Gertrude would have done the trick.

But she put on a happy face, tried to circulate around the room greeting everyone, spent as much time as she could with the grandchildren, especially Faye's kids who made the trip from New Jersey.

There was a big cake with three layers and there were some toasts. The whole affair ran about three hours, and Lucy was exhausted when it finally wound down and people said their final goodbyes and trickled out.

When it was over it was just her and Gertrude, the way it was supposed to work in the beginning. Gertrude suggested coffee, and there was a kiosk that brewed it fresh, and they took their coffees outside and stretched out in lounge chairs by one of the pools.

Gertrude had become a good friend. She was from Wisconsin, had been here only a year, but Lucy felt close enough to her where she almost wanted to tell her her secret, the one she shared with her dad, which as she thought about it was 60 years old now.

But she didn't. She'd always remained true to their agreement from back then, that early evening in the dusty town with no one around. Her dad in his calm voice telling her it was real, but that it wasn't. And that it would always be their secret, no one else's.

The main reason she didn't like birthdays was they made her miss her dad. Her mother was cold, her relationship with Lucy had been thin at best, but her dad was her world.

When Lucy was nine, her dad robbed a bank. In Oklahoma City. He was caught three days later in Arkansas. There had obviously been plenty of stuff behind the scenes in his life that he'd shielded her from. Now he was going away, the Federal Penitentiary in Terre Haute Indiana. For twelve years.

Her dad might have been paroled in nine, but he never made it that far. He died in prison in 1965 from what Lucy always thought was a broken heart.

She had one too, that she carried around with her, that shaped her life.

So birthdays were hard. Lucy and Gertrude watched the swimmers and families frolicking around the pool on this late Sunday, they talked a little movies and TV and books, and then it was time to go, and Lucy got her bicycle and pedaled back home.

Chapter 27

Pike had never been on a plane, so in that regard this was exciting. Which Pike figured was unusual when you're 18-years-old, to have never experienced flying. But his dad had loved to drive, to be in control, and all their family trips growing up were in the car.

Including, of course, the one this past June to the southwest.

You were pretty cramped in the plane, that was for sure. The second leg, San Diego to Salt Lake, they switched to a larger one, so not as bad. Pike was surprised the security seemed pretty light, no long lines or major searches like you'd heard about. He got to Salt Lake City on time, was impressed how clean the airport was and wondered if the Mormons had something to do with that, though he didn't know much about the religion and decided he shouldn't be assuming anything.

What they had him do, Western Utah, or specifically Jake Olsen, the grad assistant who was the one he'd been dealing with, was jump on a shuttle bus at the airport and get off in the center of Logan, an hour and a half away, and then to let them know he made it.

Pike started to feel a bit like he was in the middle of a cattle call, especially when he started talking to the guy across the aisle from him on the bus and it turned out the guy was going the same place, and was also being recruited. Before the bus ride was over, two more dudes spoke up who were in the same situation.

The guy across from him was a pretty nice kid, guy named Tanner Hayes from Dallas. Another quarterback, Pike learned pretty quick, so *whoopee*. All the lines Jake Olsen had been feeding him on the phone about what a *great fit* this would be for Pike, and how he has the unique skillset they're looking for. *Yeah, right*.

Pike digested it and figured he may as well go with the flow, that you're out here, which means you're not in school, so never a bad thing. Except he'd heard Hannamker was getting out of the hospital tomorrow, so there were some second thoughts about being out of town when that unfolded. But what could you do?

Olsen picked them up in a team van and checked them into the dorms. Pike was surprised how they handled it, they'd booted some of the freshman players out of their dorm rooms for the weekend, had them triple or quadruple up somewhere else, and gave the rooms to the high school recruits. Pike ended up with Hayes, the QB from the bus.

Then they went to a team practice. It wasn't in the stadium, it was on a side field, but the layout was impressive. And you had the mountains right there, snowcaps. Practice was light, with no contact, because this was Thursday and there was a game Saturday. Pike saw there were four quarterbacks in action on the field, and what looked like a couple more of them redshirting, standing nearby, so it would be quite a logjam to get any playing time out here if he did come, and of course if they did really want him in the end.

Then there was a team dinner, which they called training table, everyone together in a dedicated cafeteria across from the workout facility, which was only open to varsity athletes and off-limits to the general student population. After dinner one of the assistant coaches got up and announced how pleased they were to have the recruits in this weekend for the Wyoming game, and he had them all stand. Pike wasn't surprised by any of it any more, and there were probably forty guys total there like him, at least.

After dinner they split up the recruits by offense and defense, plus lumped all the lineman together, and they took them to one of the halls and put them in classrooms.

An assistant coach was in charge of Pike's group and first he gave a lengthy overview of the program, the expectations of student athletes, how the standard of play was on the rise, and the related BS. Then he ran the second part like a real chalk-talk session, diagramming all this junk on the board, with multiple squirly lines and arrows that Pike didn't feel like paying attention to. The head coach popped in for five minutes in the middle and gave a rehearsed speech.

It dragged on, and they didn't get out of there until close to 9. Pike and Hayes went downtown to see what that was all about. It was clearly a mostly Mormon community, a big LDS temple right in the center of things and only a few bars that they could see.

A Thursday night, very few students downtown it seemed, which Hayes said was very different than most college towns. He told Pike he'd done a recruiting trip to Colorado State and it was way different, Thursday night being the fun night on campus and everyone knew it.

One of the bars was the diviest of the two or three in town, and they could see a pool table in back, and Hayes asked Pike if he had a fake ID. Pike did have one, though he only risked using it once, last summer when he was up in San Jose with his friend Mac.

He weighed everything. If he got caught, and reported, that might be it for any shot at Western Utah. The flip side, he could pass for 21, at least people told him that. The main reason was he had a thick five o'clock shadow. He'd shave in the morning and then by that night at least a portion of it had filled back in pretty strong.

Hayes himself looked older, and who knows he might have even been 19 going on twenty, maybe he got held back in third grade or whatever. Pike decided to go for it, and they walked right in, with the bouncer just giving them a cursory check and asking how they were doing tonight.

Hayes put back a couple beers pretty quick and it turned out he wasn't a good drinker, and was getting into it a bit with two guys using the pool table who were taking too long to finish.

"Nice shot," Hayes said to the two of them, "if you're trying to avoid landing it in the pocket." He let out a laugh.

Pike didn't have a good feeling about where this was going . . . He didn't know a darn thing about this Tanner Hayes kid, other than he seemed like a nice enough guy to shoot the breeze with on a bus ride. But someone was going to fight someone here, probably sooner rather than later.

The two guys playing pool started answering back, good natured but sticking in the needle, and Hayes would try to top them. Pike noticed he was amping up the Texas good-old-boy accent as it developed.

The two guys finally finished their game and one of them came over to Hayes, who was sitting on a high stool, and the guy smiled and told him the table was all his, and as he handed him his cue stick he fired a short left hand that landed flush on Hayes's right eye.

Hayes fell off the stool and tried to scramble to his feet. The other guy had moved in now, and the look on his face told you he wasn't planning to hand over *his* cue stick, he was planning to use it on Hayes.

It occurred to Pike, in the instant before he made his move, that these guys may have been farmers, but they knew their way around in a bar fight.

Pike popped up and intercepted the second guy, wrapping him in bear hug. He heard some crackling out of the guy's back, and the guy yelled out and Pike let him go, and he dropped the cue stick and he doubled over.

Hayes was on the first guy now, he'd tackled him and they were rolling around on the floor going at it when the bouncer pulled him off. Another bouncer showed up as well, and they grabbed the two of them, Pike and Hayes, by the throats and marched them out into the street and told them don't come back.

Obviously the same rules didn't apply to the two local pool table dudes, which was no surprise. Though the one guy who Pike bear hugged probably had other things to worry about now.

Despite getting clocked, Hayes was kind of giddy and tried to high-five Pike, though he was staggering a little and missed. "Buddy," he said, "that was some quick thinking in there . . . by you . . . Y'all saved my ass, I ain't ashamed to admit it!"

Pike decided he didn't care for Hayes, but he didn't like looking at his eye, was ballooning up bad, so he told him they should find some ice. There was a hole-in-the-wall donut place still open and they sat down in there while Hayes iced his messed up face.

The idiot was talking non-stop, telling Pike now about all his supposed other fights and giving blow-by-blow descriptions. Pike ordered a coffee and an apple fritter and tried to block him out. Some old guy at the end of the counter was listening out of politeness, so luckily after a little while Hayes turned his attention to that guy and continued his stories.

There was a metal bin by the door with mixed up newspaper sections and Pike picked one up to kill time.

The front page was mostly the presidential election coming up, Trump versus Clinton, and the ramifications for northern Utah and southeastern Idaho, and the local races that were being contested.

Then inside, on page 2, there was this headline:

Adrenaline Surge Credited for Pocatello Woman's Abnormal Feat in Life-and-Death Struggle by Lincoln Paul

October 19th, 2016 - A Pocatello woman's burst of strength that resulted in the self-defense death of her boyfriend three weeks ago was likely the result of an acute surge of adrenaline, a physiologist said Tuesday.

Dr. Hiram Blackenship, a medical sciences professor at ISU, said the human brain and body often react to dire stress in complex ways scientists are only beginning to understand. "Our guess is, that in these situations, instincts tied all the way back to primitive man can indeed surface, yielding a 'perfect storm' moment of surprising strength and focus," he said.

Dani Andriessen, 26, of 128 South 5th Street killed her boyfriend Marcus Roberts, 28, in self-defense on the afternoon of October 4th in the apartment they shared, after he confronted her with a loaded firearm, police said.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a sheriff's department forensics investigator told the Bannock County News that Roberts' body appeared to have been launched several feet across the living room and ended up wedged into a wall that had been substantially compromised by the impact.

Pocatello Police spokesperson Mike Mullins responded only by saying the incident contained the volatile mix of alcohol, a loaded weapon, and a victim fearing for her life.

Andriessen is a second-year kindergarten teacher at Oak Grove School in Blackfoot. She could not be reached for comment.

Roberts, a 2012 ISU graduate, was a computer coder for Ark Tech Systems in Chubbuck.

Pike tried to digest what he'd just read, and he read it again, slower.

Could it be simply what they were claiming? A one and done deal? Like when you'd hear of a grandma in Kansas who held up the side of a blown-down house so her grandkid would make it out after a hurricane?

That was probably it. A surge. And like the expert doc said, the brain is complicated, and the body feeds off the brain . . . *Right?*

Pike dragged Hayes out of the donut place, the eye was showing assorted interesting colors now, and they hustled back to the dorm and made it just under the curfew wire, which was midnight, and maybe it was the clean mountain air, but Pike slept the best he had in a while.

Chapter 28

On Friday there was a team breakfast, but with the recruits herded together in the side section of the cafeteria, and soon enough the players were up and gone, since they had class, though Pike wondered how serious that all was for most of them.

Jake Olsen told the recruits to bus their trays and sit back down, and then there was more lecturing about football and life. Jake spoke well, he had good enthusiasm, but Pike was bored off his rear end. Hayes was sitting next to him, not saying much at all this morning. The eye didn't look too good, in fact he looked in pretty bad shape all around, and guys were asking about it. Hayes did the right thing and waved them off and this time kept his mouth shut.

After that they took them on a campus tour. That part was kind of an eye-opener for Pike. You had all these students, most of them looking pretty content, and every part of your life was right here. You were isolated, but then again you weren't. If you were very interested in studying something, you could dive in for four years, without having to worry about too much else.

Pike figured that scenario didn't apply to him too well though, since he didn't have anything at the moment he was real interested in studying, and that the commitment of football, with these guys owning you, would probably screw everything else up anyway.

What he couldn't shake loose of though, despite these various activities today, was that Dani Andriessen lady.

They gave them an afternoon break and Pike found a bench in the sun in main quad and looked her up. There was one article from when it happened, and another a few days later when the local DA announced no charges would be filed in the death of this deadbeat.

There was a tiny item from last year about a rookie teacher award, with a picture of a her being handed a small plaque by an older man in front of a school. Not a bad looking lady, and more than that, she looked pretty happy there, not like someone who not that much later would have to stare down her life in a flash because of some a-hole.

Something else Pike noticed in that newspaper photo: she was on the small side. Not tiny like a gymnast, but Pike's guess was plenty of people would call her petite.

Okay, a massive adrenaline surge, whatever.

No phone number listed. She was in places like LInkedin but with no contact info . . . Then Pike thought of something obvious . . . that school . . . What was it again, Oak Grove, in Blackfoot?

There wasn't a school website but there was a district one. There was a section for parents. In a subheading was: **Contact Your Child's Teacher.**

Hmmm . . . this would a pretty forward move, wouldn't it?

Pike wrestled with it. The poor lady needed some stranger asking her questions like a hole in the head. Especially after she just fought off an idiot and is probably just starting to recover.

Pike left it alone and went back to the dorm and took a nap. Hayes was in there already, his head under sheets in the lower bunk, still not feeling good at all today. What a surprise.

That night, Friday, there was a bonfire in an outdoor cement theater by the stadium. It was pretty impressive. You had the band and the cheerleaders, and the whole team got up there in their street clothes with their home jerseys on over their shirts, and the head coach made a speech. The coach kept raising his fist for emphasis, and each time the whole place, overflowing with students inside and outside the theater too, where they were watching on a giant screen, would erupt in a chant.

Afterward Pike hooked up with a couple of the other recruits (not Hayes this time) and they scoured around Fraternity Row, seeing if there were any parties going on that they could walk into. They got turned away a couple places but they were enjoying themselves, it was becoming a challenge.

Finally around the corner from the main row there was a house that didn't look as good, or as popular, and they could hear music thumping away in there, and there were a few guys on the front lawn playing beer pong, though Pike suspected no one was drinking.

Anyhow, this fraternity gave you the impression it was hurting, like a wannabe party, and one of the recruits talked to the beer pong guys and they said come on in.

Pike lagged behind for a minute though, and under the street lamp outside this place he emailed Dani Andriessen.

He had to, he decided. He just did.

He tried not to think about it overnight, but when he got up and checked his phone and there was nothing, he was discouraged. Oh well, he gave it a shot.

But he kept checking messages all morning, and still zip. Then it occurred to him that that was a school staff email he found, and she probably wouldn't even see it until Monday morning. He thought of a back door way, which was get hold of that newspaper reporter and ask him how to contact the woman . . . but that was insane, that would never work, and it would only make the reporter suspicious.

They got them to the stadium early and they let the recruits stay on the field through the warm up and right until the opening kickoff. Then they sat low down in the corner of the endzone. Pike tried to visualize himself out there for real, in uniform, and he wasn't sure.

Western Utah was taking on Wyoming, who had upped its game the last couple seasons and was tied with Boise State for first in the Mountain West conference. The stadium was packed and the fans were frequently going wild, but Pike got a little bored after the first quarter. He couldn't care less who won, that was the first thing. Second, every play kind of looked the same, both teams playing fast, no huddles any more, everyone just getting to the line right away but then stalling and lifting their heads back up like a bunch of elephants in the circus, and looking to the sideline where one of the coaches was signalling them what to do.

With around four minutes left in the first half, Pike's phone buzzed. It was an area code he didn't recognize. He answered it but couldn't hear anything on the other end because the stadium was too damn noisy. He told the person very loudly to please hang on, and he hustled up about twenty rows to where you exited under the stands, where all the food concessions were.

Even there he still couldn't hear, so he walked out the main gate, hoping they'd let him back in, and tried it again.

"Hello?" he said. "Anyone still there?"

There was a delay and Pike was about to hang up when a voice said, "I'm still here . . . It wasn't clear if you were, though." It was a woman, and there was a playful, singsong tone to her voice.

Pike wasn't moving a muscle now. "Are you . . . Dani, by any chance?" he said.

"I am indeed," she said. "What did you need to speak to me about?"

Pike stumbled around. "Okay, well I'm not a parent, or anything."

"Yes, I assumed as much. You sound a bit young."

He took deep breath. “What I’m going to do here . . . I’m going to let it all hang out . . . and if I’m out of line . . . or especially if I’m completely off target, which I easily could be . . . then just hang up on me.”

“Goodness, gracious,” she said.

“What? . . . You know where I’m going with this?”

“I have no clue. But I’m somewhat intrigued now, I must admit . . . I don’t believe you sound like a dangerous person, or a disturbed one. *Are you?*” The tone a little less playful now.

“No, not all. You have to take my word for it . . . All right, here’s the thing. I read about what went down . . . and I’m going to ask you direct . . . Did something happen where you all of a sudden got strong?”

Dani was stunned by the question, but was also cautious. This could be a normal question that someone who’d been following the news might actually have.

“Are you referring to . . . the incident?” she said.

“No,” Pike said. “Before that . . . was it like, you woke up one day, and you noticed this weird, scary strength?”

There was maybe thirty seconds of silence on the end of the line, and then Dani clicked off.

Pike rolled it around. Maybe he’d actually hit on something, and it touched a nerve with her. More likely, though, she took it as some cranker looking in a roundabout way for gorey details of her wasting the guy. Pike didn’t doubt she’d dealt with a few of those already.

Luckily they let him back in the stadium, his recruit ID tag around the neck helping out. It was halftime when he sat back down. The marching bands took turns zigzagging across the field, and then someone galloped around on a horse carrying a big flag, and then they had fans come out and try to kick field goals from various distances. Watching that part was hard to take.

Midway through the third quarter his phone buzzed again, and he took a look, and it was Audrey and he let it go. Though he had to wonder now if her texting him out here might mean something. Jack Hannamaker supposedly got out of the hospital yesterday, after having his jaw wired and a couple others things done, that Pike didn’t feel particularly guilty about.

Still, hard to know how strong the bond may be between Audrey and that guy. Pike guessed he’d find out soon enough.

Western Utah hung tough but Wyoming had a few too many weapons, and they busted open a close game in the fourth quarter. Jake Olsen had the recruits wait outside the locker room after the game. It took forever, standing there with the parents and girlfriends of the players, waiting for some sign of life. Finally one by one the players started coming out, no one real upset about the final score, more like they were relieved they got through the game without getting hurt.

The plan was to get on one of the team busses and they'd go to a restaurant for dinner, a certain steakhouse that was apparently a tradition after every home game, win or lose. It looked like half the players had come out of the locker room, and some were getting on the busses, and some were mingling with their parents or whatever, when Dani called again.

This time to hear her better he went back into the stadium, since it was empty now except for a couple guys down on the field doing post-game turf maintenance on golf carts.

There was a dead-seriousness to her voice that wasn't there before. She said, "I just have one question for you: How would you know, what may or may not have happened to me?"

Pike could answer this one of a few ways, without committing himself to anything. It felt for a couple seconds like a bunch of opposing forces were clashing in his head. He wasn't sure what he was about to blurt out, but then it came.

"Cause it happened to me."

Dani hung up again, but this time Pike was pretty darn sure she was going to call back. He took a seat in the stadium, things started to get dark now and the lights came on so the maintenance workers could see what they were doing.

It took her twenty minutes. "You say that," she said, "but *what* exactly happened to you, if you don't mind."

Pike said, "Okay. I got, like super strong . . . it happened, I'll tell you *exactly* when it happened because it's not something you forget easy . . . it was early last month . . . September 9th . . . a Friday."

She said, "Well did . . . did you have . . . was there any warning?"

"Nope. What it was, I tackled a guy in a football game . . . I'm in high school, out in California . . . I pretty much knew right then . . . Next day, I did some shit that confirmed it without a doubt. I'm sorry about my language."

It sounded through the phone like Dani was breathing kind of hard, or maybe crying or getting emotional some other way. It seemed like a good idea to keep talking.

So he said, "I've been trying to figure it out ever since. Barely a minute goes by I'm not wondering about it . . . I sort of told one person, this older guy I trust who's trying to help . . . I try to put on a good face . . . The thing of it is, I'm scared."

"I'm scared too," Dani said.

They both let that linger. Pike couldn't help wondering, what might it be like to meet this person. On the one hand it could be a massive relief, to finally have found someone who gets it. On the other hand, he could obviously be opening a giant can of worms.

He considered all this, and then asked her, "How far's Pocatello from Logan, Utah?"

"Why do you ask?" Dani said. It sounded like she'd gotten hold of herself, that she wasn't crying or breathing hard anymore.

"I think I should come up and see you," he said.

"I see," she said. "Do you think that's a good idea?" She was probably having the same second-thoughts, about the can of worms.

"Yeah."

Dani hung up again. Five minutes later when she called back Pike said, "Jeez. You keep doing that to people in normal life? . . . Or just me?"

She laughed slightly, which Pike was glad about. "Just you," she said. "To answer your question, it's an hour and a half . . . If you're driving. Are you?"

Pike said he wasn't, but he was hunting around on his phone, and it looked like the same shuttle bus from the Salt Lake City airport that brought him to Logan continued on to Pocatello. There was one that left from downtown at 7:12.

"The other part of it is," he said, "I'm involved with a group thing here at the college, through the weekend."

"That's fine, naturally," she said, but he thought he detected disappointment in her voice.

"Give me a few minutes," he said.

He hoofed it back under the stadium and over to the locker room and then outside, where the busses had been waiting. They were gone, and everything was quiet. He knew the name of the steakhouse and could easily take a taxi, or an Uber if they had them out here, and head into the restaurant and get lost in the shuffle and probably not get in any trouble.

Then again, he tried to think: Was there time to grab his stuff out of the dorm room and make it downtown in time for the 7:12? He decided there was.

He didn't call Dani back until he was on the shuttle bus. All that running around, he was sweating like a dog. But that wasn't important.

"It's me," he said. "You said an hour and a half, but this thing, with stops and the rest of it, they're telling me 9:18, is when I'll be arriving at . . . it looks like *Maverik Exit 69* . . . That ring a bell?"

"Yes, I know where it is," Dani said. She didn't say that she'd meet him there. Pike left it alone. She'd have a couple hours to decide what she wanted to do.

Meanwhile, he wondered how his recruiting profile would be affected by going AWOL from the thing on the Saturday night. Though it didn't concern him all that much actually, and he was able to grab a half-hour of sleep once the shuttle bus turned off the curvy road from Logan and got on Interstate 15, which was much straighter and better.

Chapter 29

Pike stepped down off the bus and there was a woman over by the far guard rail, leaning against her car. She had on shorts and a sweater and was wearing a baseball cap.

There were a couple of other people being picked up, but they were accounted for now in the parking lot.

Pike walked over to the woman who he was pretty positive was Dani.

“Are you hungry?” she said.

“That’s it?” Pike said. “How do you even know it’s me?”

“I guess I’m just naturally intuitive,” she said.

“Yeah, I’m starving, if you really want to know.” He was thinking about the steak dinner he missed, and hadn’t done anything yet to replace.

He got in the car with her and they went to 5 Guys Burgers. It wasn’t bad at all. The best thing were the fries. Pike reminded himself this was Idaho, potato country, and the burger place gave you the name of the actual potato farm they used, on a chalk board next to the counter.

“Thank you,” Pike said, when they got back in the car. “I can think straighter now.” Dani hadn’t said much so far. She mostly listened to Pike and observed, kind of like she was watching him audition. To see if this unlikely, not to mention *unwordly scenario* really did add up.

But what was happening, was they both were dancing around the *real* subject. No one brought it up.

“Do you drink coffee?” she said.

Pike could take it or leave it but said sure. Dani drove downtown, to a 24-hour coffee shop that was right across from the university. She parked on the street.

Pike got out and came around the car, and Dani was on the sidewalk.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” he said. “Forgetting everything else, this is an adventure. A couple days ago I fly for the first time, and today I’m in another new state . . . What do you know.”

Dani didn’t say anything, she just looked at him, not in a hurry to go inside.

Pike said, "So . . . I guess I've been rude . . . all this happening so quick, just today . . . I haven't even really said hello to you . . . thanks for meeting me." He reached out his right hand.

Dani started take it, to shake hands, but then fell into his arms. She was crying, there was no doubt about that now like there may have been on the phone. She buried her face in his shoulder and held him tight.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Pike wrapped his arms around her back, and he started crying too. He was experiencing a connection that he couldn't expect people to understand. It was . . . kind of like meeting a long-lost sister for the first time . . . except it was more complicated.

"It just feels so good," Dani set, wiping her eyes and trying to get under control, "to be able to let it out."

Pike said, "You've never let it out before?"

"No I haven't," she said. "You still feel like that coffee?"

"I'd love it," he said. He wished he had better manners and carried a handkerchief or something, like his mom told him to more than once, and then he could help Dani. Her face was wet and her makeup was smearing, so he told her to please use the front of his shirt, and she smiled but didn't, and she pulled something out of her purse.

Dani said the strawberry-rhubarb pie was good, they were known for it, so Pike ordered a slice, and when he finished it he decided she was right, and got another one.

Dani stuck with a cup of coffee. "It was a Tuesday night," she said. "June 15th . . . last year . . . 2015."

"Ho-ly shit . . . a year and a half then."

"I'd just finished my student teaching. I was spending the summer looking hard for a job. I grabbed some hours at the student rec center lifeguarding and teaching swimming . . . Then one night I took a spin class."

Pike was nodding. "Where you're going with this," he said, "you broke the bike . . . except you were shocked . . . you couldn't understand how."

"Close. Apparently there are different types of bikes, with different ways that they create resistance. Mine had a band that tightened down on a flywheel . . . It started off innocently, it felt quite good actually to be exercising like that . . . then unfortunately the smoke started."

"Oh yeah, I can see that," Pike said. "Anyone . . . suspect anything?"

“Fortunately no, and I didn’t suspect anything myself. When class ended and there was no one around, I went back in there, thinking I must have been hallucinating. But the same thing happened.”

“Man . . . so you, reined it in, after that?”

“Exactly. I’ve been careful . . . There’ve been a few situations where I’ve had to act quick.”

“I know,” Pike said, thinking about the Marcus deal. “I give you all the credit.”

“Yes, but I meant other situations . . . I was in a Barnes and Noble bookstore, in the mall, and there was a painter outside with a scaffold, and a little child, and a situation was developing.”

“And you had to intervene.”

“Yes. It was strange, I felt an obligation to do so.”

“Not to mention, you had the capability.”

“Yes, that too.”

“Wow,” Pike said.

“Why?” Dani said. “You’ve had similar experiences?”

“Oh yeah. A couple of ‘em. The first one . . . I basically stopped a theft by holding up the front end of a car.”

Dani didn’t seem surprised.

“But the obligation part,” he said. “I never thought of it like that.”

“Another one,” Dani was saying, “I was in line at the motor vehicles office. An older gentleman, he appears to have a heart attack. He’s unconscious and not breathing. Someone starts administering CPR, but I have a strong urge to take over. Which I do . . . I nudge the person out of the way, and then with two fingers I start massaging the man’s heart . . . I broke his ribs and what not, but I could feel his heart responding. By the time EMS arrived he was sitting up.”

Pike was digesting this. Among other things, he decided Dani was beautiful. Though that was beside the point.

“I was at the beach three weeks ago,” he said. “I ran into the water to help a lifeguard . . . They didn’t need me, it turned out . . . But yeah, it was like someone flicked a switch, and I went into action, kind of automatically.”

“What else?” she said.

“Ah, well, there was this road crew fixing an emergency hole, and it was getting dark? I probably just imagined it, but I thought a truck was going to back into one of the guys, so I sort of threw him out of the way.”

“Far?”

“Far enough . . . Luckily the other workers got a kick out of it, and started ribbing the guy, and didn’t focus much on me.”

“When I . . . first had a problem with Marcus . . . I tried to hold back.” She was talking quieter now, serious.

“But you hurt him anyway?” Pike said, lowering his voice now too.

“I . . . just kind of flicked him away. Like you’d do with a gnat or a mosquito . . . When you’re out camping.” Her voice broke. Pike wanted to say something but didn’t know what.

“I’m sorry if I’m making you uncomfortable,” she said

“Are you kidding?” Pike said. “This is, like, the best thing that’s happened to me in a month . . . Plus the guy they roomed me with in Logan, I’m not sure about him.”

Dani laughed a little. Then she said, “What is this?”

“Do you have any ideas at all? Like theories?”

“I wish I did. Honestly? I’m thankful every day when I wake up and nothing’s changed. For the worse, I mean . . . Beyond that, I simply do not.”

Pike said, “Okay, I’ll throw something out there in a second. But what about a doctor?”

“You mean,” she said, “did I get examined by one? At first, when it happened, I nearly marched right in the next day . . . But then I didn’t.”

“I know. You start thinking about stuff, and it stops you in your tracks.”

“The negatives could greatly outweigh the positives,” she said.

“Friends? Your family?”

“No . . . Have you?”

“A couple people. My girlfriend Cathy, which I shouldn’t have done. She tried but she couldn’t handle it, and then she dumped me . . . Then like I mentioned, an old guy. Who runs a UFO reporting website.”

“That’s sounds like an unusual person to open up to,” Dani said.

“It was.”

“How about your parents?”

“No way . . . Okay here’s the thing now . . . I know this is going to sound totally out of left field. Did you go to a dentist before it happened?”

Dani had kind of a blank stare. “You are right,” she said, “that is a crazy question. Why?”

“Did you?”

“Well I’d have to look up the date, but I recall going in early last year, yes.”

“So we’re talking 2015? Like February March, around then?”

“I think so.”

“And what’d they do?”

“Routine check up. I had one cavity.”

“And they took care of it? . . . What kind of filling?”

Dani said, “My goodness, this is odd. You seem to be on mission here . . . Normally I get porcelain but, since you seem to need the gory details . . . this was a back tooth, so my dentist recommended the old-fashioned type. He said they’re stronger.”

They finished up. It hit Pike that he was pretty drained. Dani insisted on paying for a room for him at the Super 8. She told him she’d stayed there recently and it was nice.

Pike slept late, took advantage of the surprisingly complete breakfast spread they put out for you in the lobby, and then reversed the whole shebang. The airport shuttle to Salt Lake, the flight to San Diego and finally the transfer flight to Fresno.

As that final one was coming in for a landing, he reminded himself to not forget to pay her back for the room.

Chapter 30

Pike was going through the motions at school the next day. He could have used about another six hours of sleep, but what could you do.

He stopped at his locker between third and fourth period and coming down the hall toward him were Audrey and Jack Hannamaker. The guy looked kind of grim and hunched over, but the bad part of it was he had his arm around Audrey and she seemed to be fine with it.

Then after seventh period, as he was dumping everything in his locker again, getting ready to go to practice, Cathy taps him on the shoulder.

“How was your adventure?” she said, and for a moment he thought she meant connecting with Dani, and how the heck would she know about that, but she was asking about the recruiting trip.

“It was uneven, honestly,” he said. “It kind of opened my eyes. Maybe not the worst thing to stay right here in California.”

“Anyway, Pike, what I wanted to tell you, Reggie is going to be out here this week. He’s willing to speak to you.”

“Jeez, *Reggie* now. First name basis.”

“Could you please? . . . I’m trying to help you. You should take advantage, and meet him.”

Pike knew he was being a jerk. “I apologize. And I appreciate this, I really do.”

Cathy told him she’d update him, that Reggie was on a cross country run, and his timing depended on various factors, and that was it, and Pike watched her walk toward the end of the hall and disappear out a door.

As they were fooling around on the field before the whistle blew to kick off practice, Coach asked Pike how it went. Pike said it went great, but there were a lot of quarterbacks under consideration. Coach told him you keep your head up and focus, good things happen. This was starting to get old.

When he checked his phone that night there was a message from Mitch. Pike waited until he had some basic homework out of the way . . . Everything that was going on, that was still part of the gig unfortunately . . . and he called him back.

“Now on the guy holding on to the filling,” Mitch said, getting right to it, “I believe I’ve convinced him to get it tested by a lab.”

“Great,” Pike said. “How’d you pull *that* off?”

“I’m paying the sucker. Sort of renting it from him. Temporarily. So I can control the testing.”

“Dang . . . So he’s, like, sticking it in an envelope and mailing it to you then?”

“Yeah I got it worked out. Registered and certified, all that BS. The way they’d ship a diamond.”

“Wow, so *then* what?”

“Then I’m taking it to a lab out here. Not sure which one yet, but I’m walking it in, personally.”

“Okay let me ask you this--what if the guy just sends you some other filling?”

“Don’t see it as an issue honestly . . . If he did, hypothetically, I’d have to drive out there and kick his ass.”

Pike liked Mitch’s spunk tonight. “But how would you know?” he said.

“Okay let’s don’t worry about that right now. I’m going by instinct here. This is a simple man, whose word is good . . . As is mine . . . I’ll get it back to him after we figure out what’s in it. If anything.”

Pike was working it around, should he tell Mitch about Dani. He didn’t see a reason to for now.

But before he went to bed he called her.

“Too late?” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “You would have woken me up. But I haven’t been able to sleep well for a few weeks.”

Pike hadn’t touched that subject when he met her, but maybe it was okay. He said, “And are you still . . . in the same place, and all?”

“Yep. The landlord took care of the repairs. I’m okay with that part. It’s not the physical environment that’s affecting me.”

“Either way,” Pike said, “why not move into the Super 8? It was great. You can probably make a deal with them for a long term rate.”

“It’s funny you mention that,” Dani said. “I actually inquired about it.”

“But you’re fine for now.”

“Yes. Thank you for asking . . . Was there any particular reason you called?”

“Not really.”

“Because you don’t have to have one.”

This was a special person.

“I wish you lived closer,” he said. “What I’ll do though, any news at all, I’ll fill you in.”

“And you’re expecting some?” Dani said.

“I’m not . . . but there are a few . . . irons in the fire. Didn’t want to bore you with the details. I still don’t.”

“What kind of irons?”

“Okay . . . it’s all sort of embarrassing. Stuff I never would have believed in a million years . . . Bottom line, there’s a guy--supposedly--he got a filling, got strong, panicked, had it taken out . . . Then he got weak. Weaker than before.”

Dani was quiet.

“We’re trying to test the filling, see what was in it?”

“We?” Dani said.

“Sorry, me and the old guy in LA. Him taking care of it actually.”

“I see.”

“What? You sound like something’s wrong.”

“No. It’s just that I’ve been wondering about that the past two days now . . . What if I removed mine?”

Pike said, “I’ve gone through that too.”

“And common sense told me that would be too simple,” Dani said. “So this confirms it I guess . . . Which is a bit disappointing, nonetheless.”

“I know.”

“You say there is one more ‘iron in the fire’?” she said.

“Yeah, well, a truck driver that we sort of connected with . . . he could be way out in the Twilight Zone . . . but he claims his brother had it. I’m supposed to meet him this week.”

“*Had it?*”

“He says the guy was in the military, that he died in Afghanistan . . . a couple years ago.”

“Gosh,” Dani said. Pike decided to leave out the part about Reggie saying his brother traveled back in time. *Enough was enough*, for now, and they said goodnight.

It was Halloween, and kids had been ringing the bell all night. Pike couldn’t help thinking, what was the atmosphere like at Audrey’s.

It had barely been a month. The Milburns had had a private funeral, and just a few days after that is when Mr. Milburn got into it with Foxe's dad.

Holidays, even ones like Halloween, had to be the worst. Pike called Audrey.

"This is not about Jack, or anything," he said. "I was out of line trying to move in on things."

"Thank you for saying that," Audrey said. "I've been feeling some guilt."

"Nah please don't . . . You doing okay *tonight*?"

"Yes. It's been refreshing actually, the little children's faces . . . I know what you're thinking, but tonight was good for me, and Hailey both."

Pike didn't believe her. Nothing would be good for a long while.

"Don't be a stranger," he said.

"You neither," Audrey said.

Chapter 31

The Miramar game was set for Friday, at home, the final regular season game before the sectionals, and senior night. There were banners around school, and an extra assembly was being thrown in on Monday, which was nothing more than a disguised football rally, but what the heck, you got out of class.

Meanwhile on Tuesday Pike got an email from Jake Olsen, the Western Utah grad assistant, which thanked him for visiting the program but ended by saying the school has trimmed its recruiting pool and unfortunately his name has been withdrawn from consideration, but to not take it personally, and continued good luck with his football career, wherever he might end up.

Not a surprise, and Pike thought about it for maybe two seconds . . . He was curious how the bar pool-player was who he bear-hugged though, and if Hayes felt better by the end of the weekend.

Cathy found him at lunch. The latest, was Reggie Riley would be in Woodling, at a truck stop of all places, Thursday morning.

Woodling was along the interstate. You headed over to where In-N-Out was, then hopped on the freeway maybe twenty miles north. So about an hour from Beacon.

“Should I go through with this?” Pike said.

“Of course you should,” Cathy said, “why wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t know . . . he doesn’t seem all there . . . The aliens. The brother time traveling . . . Guys like this, they could have easily just been released from a mental hospital, and then they, like, find a job driving a big rig.”

Cathy said quietly, “I think you know you should go.”

Pike knew it too, of course. “Are you coming with me?” he said.

“No,” she said. “I’m sorry. I’m not comfortable, being more involved . . . than I already am.”

There was nothing Pike could say to that. He’d put it on her plate, the whole enchilada, when he let his emotion get the better of him. He regretted it, big-time

Cathy gave Pike Reggie’s number. “I won’t be in contact with him anymore,” she said. “I feel like I did what I could.”

“You’re not kidding,” Pike said. “C’mere.” They hugged, and he hoped she knew how much he appreciated it, though the hug wasn’t like the old days, and soon enough she was back with her friends at one of the tables in the quad, and they were laughing about something, so that was that.

On Wednesday morning word spread around school that Mr. Milburn had encountered Mr. Foxe at the supermarket, Safeway, last night. Apparently Mr. Milburn spotted him in the meat section and took a run at him from about twenty yards away, with his cart.

It didn’t sound like Mr. Foxe was seriously injured, but the police came. You couldn’t blame Audrey’s dad one iota, he was just reacting, but this would only make matters worse, and reinforce the injustice that might be developing. Foxe, the murderer, with a slick lawyer, and Mr. Milburn, insanely, maybe paying the bigger price.

Pike tried Reggie Riley first thing out of bed Thursday morning. The guy picked up, and sure enough he said he’d be in Woodling today, ‘running’ the Interstate there as he put it.

Pike asked when, if there was a ballpark, and Reggie said he’d let him know, and got off.

This was starting to feel important, now that it might really be happening, and Pike was tossing around how he’d handle it if the guy got there during practice. Today was a walk-through, everything light, the day before the game. But you couldn’t miss it.

Fortunately he wasn’t confronted with that decision. During physiology, 2nd period, Pike standing over a lab bench with his partner, Reggie gets back to him, he’ll be there in 45 minutes.

Pike tore out of the classroom, didn’t say a word to anyone, including Mr. Becker up there, and as he hustled to the car he texted Reggie to PLEASE wait for him.

He kept it at the speed limit and it did take slightly over an hour, but Reggie had said look for him inside at the counter, he’d have a Clemson cap on. And there he was.

Reggie wasn’t what Pike expected. He was a little guy, neatly groomed, no facial hair, a Hawaiian shirt and shorts, and running shoes. He could have been a guy who worked a regular corporate job, sitting there in his casual weekend attire.

But then Reggie opened his mouth, “Howdy pardner, how you?”, which is more what Pike expected.

Pike had always been curious about long distance truckers, the thought of being on the open road all day appealed to him, and he couldn’t help himself, he had a few questions.

“You own your truck,” he asked Reggie, “or how’s that work?”

“In my case I do,” Reggie said. “Finance charges’ll do you wrong though. Wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Well what are the best routes?”

“Earnings-wise that’d be 95. New York to Florida . . . All-around nice though? Well you’ve got 80 through the mid states. Then you have your 101 out here. North out of Frisco to Seattle/Portland.”

Pike said, “How is it sleeping in the truck?”

“I can sleep like a baby, or not,” Reggie said. “Depending.”

“Do you ever get, like a full 7 or 8 hours? Or is it all broken up?”

“Broke up,” Reggie said. “This why we’re meetin’ though?”

“No,” Pike said. “I didn’t mean to be stalling . . . if that’s what you think.” Even though that’s what he was doing. “Could you please tell me a little more about your brother?”

“Why’s that?” *Oh no.*

Pike said, “I have to level with you then. I’m not at all saying I *am*, but it’s *possible* I’m experiencing some of the same stuff.”

“What same stuff? Going backwards in years?”

“I don’t know . . . how’s that work . . . or how *did* that work, for Billy?”

“All’s he tells me, one day he’s in the mess hall. Breakfast. They’d just done their morning run, like the Marines makes you do. Straight out of bed . . . You considering the service, son?”

“I don’t know,” Pike said, praying that’s not the end of the story.

“Confusing after that, what *did* happen. All I picked up from my brother, he’s bussing his tray, and then somebody asks him to go outside and do something, or bring something in. Don’t really know . . . Then he says he’s back in Charlotte, where we spent the summer as kids. Playing catch with our grandpa.”

“This was . . . just in his head though, right?” Pike said.

“He said it was real,” Reggie said. “My brother was a straight shooter. I believe him.”

“Okay, and you say it happened another time? He went further back . . . more years?”

“Yeah, but I give you enough, I believe. Something to work with . . . Or maybe it isn’t. No skin off my back either way.”

“Did he . . . lose time when he went back? I mean the same amount both places?”

“That was the funny thing about it. He said he lost an hour.”

Pike wasn't sure what that meant, but he didn't want to irritate the guy any more by over-asking stuff. He said, "But aliens caused it, you think? All of it? The extra strength . . . and the going back?"

"Most definitely," Reggie said. "They screwed with his teeth. There you go."

This was unnerving for Pike, since some of it was starting to ring true, even if the rest was ludicrous. "Do you mean . . . people from outer space, they abducted your brother, and implanted him or something, like you see them talking about on the internet?"

"No idea. He just told me they got to his teeth . . . This was from over there, he told me this. On Skype . . . Got beat by a roadsider, my little brother . . . not long after . . . Rest in peace." Reggie stared at the counter for a moment and composed himself.

"Well I appreciate this," Pike said.

"Glad to be of help. Was it any?"

"Oh yeah. You gave me plenty to think about."

"What's your deal again? You say you got a super-strong thing going on?"

Pike wondered how much Cathy had told him, but again, what could it hurt. "I seem to, yeah . . . Something to do with my teeth, also."

"Well I gotta hit the road," Reggie said. "Good luck with it. And watch out for those little fuckers." He got up and headed to the bathroom, and Pike figured that was his signal to leave.

He drove the twenty minutes down the Interstate, got off at the exit for 121 which took you to back to Beacon, but there was In-N-Out and he was starving.

Before he went in he called Mitch. "You okay?" Pike said.

"Yeah," Mitch said. "I'm running around a little more than I'm used to's all."

"I hope it's not on my account." Which it was.

"Don't worry about it. I have a vested interest here as well."

Pike told him the basics of his meet-up with Reggie Riley. Plus how Cathy had discovered that first posting on Mitch's website in the middle of the night. Which was what led Pike to Mitch, Pike pointed out. Not that any of that logistical stuff mattered

Mitch worked it around. "So what we've got, as the dust is settling . . . Four now, more or less confirmed. Right? . . . The Florida and Utah ones, my Texas guy, and now this Mr. Riley's brother . . . Oh, plus you of course. Am I missing anyone else?"

There was Dani but forget that for now. "This one, it could be different," Pike said. "The alien part."

“Well did you ask him if his brother had been in a recent dental office?”

“I should have. I was kind of afraid to.”

“Now why’s that?” Mitch said.

“He was a strange dude. All business. And like he may have had a short fuse.”

“I’d put money on it that he was, at this point,” Mitch said.

“Something else too . . . he claims the guy went back in time. To when they were kids . . . Which I chalk up to the brother hallucinating over there in Iraq, or whatever, which is where he told Reggie this from.”

“Very interesting,” Mitch said. “So *that’s* why you were asking me about traveling, whether it’s theoretically possible . . . It seemed a bit odd for you to be concerned with.”

Pike left it alone.

“How’d he do it?” Mitch said.

“No idea. Reggie didn’t know either. They did their morning run, and then he went in back of the mess hall or something . . . Why am I even telling you, this is so lame.”

“Might or might not be,” Mitch said. “Okay, anyhow . . . Our news is we got the filling today. I had to sign for it and such, which was good.”

“Jeez Louise. Already?”

“What, you got some problem with that now?”

“Not at all, I just didn’t think it was a done deal, so quick.”

“What can I tell you, he wanted to get paid . . . Now I have to find the right lab.”

“How’s *that* work?”

“Not sure, not something I do every day . . . I’m looking at trustworthy, as the main criteria.”

“You’re worried about them not being thorough, you mean, with the test?”

“I’m thinking more, they don’t get a notion to make off with the item. Should it actually happen to be . . . unique.”

“That sounds very improbable,” Pike said.

“Yeah? Well let me worry about that . . . What else you got?”

“That’s it. Everything else, it’s pretty routine.”

“Keep your radar up,” Mitch said.

Chapter 32

Friday night a half hour before kickoff Mr. Hill the principal got out there and did his thing, and the seniors all lined up on the fifty-yard-line and were introduced one by one, and after each introduction that senior's parents would run onto the field and join them.

Pike told his parents, bring Bo and Jackie on the field too, don't worry about any rules. They did, and it was a nice moment having the family together out there. Some of the players had girlfriends joining them as well, but Pike didn't have to worry about that at the moment. Though he was happy to see Hannamaker, when he got introduced, wasn't joined by Audrey. He wondered did that mean anything, but probably it didn't.

Miramar had a decent quarterback, Pike had to admit. The truth was, the guy was much better than he was, if you take away *the advantage*.

But hey, you were out here and you did what you had to do, and Hamilton got up 21-7 early, and then nursed it home. Pike didn't feel like he had a particularly big game, but when he saw the stats he'd only had 4 incompletions and he threw for three touchdowns, so he had to call it good enough.

The team went for ice cream after the game. There was a big place on McClellan Boulevard, a skate rink, that had party rooms and all that. It's where you went for team get-togethers, from Little League through kids' soccer and CYO basketball on up.

Tonight Hamilton had booked the whole joint, including the skating. There were a surprising number of parents, not just the parents of the seniors but plenty of others. About an hour into it, Pike was very surprised to see Mr. Foxe out there on the rink, skating around with his wife.

Pike stood at the railing watching them and contemplated this. Under normal circumstances, Foxe would be recognized tonight too, on Senior Night. *And under real normal circumstances, he would still be the starting quarterback also, but that's getting off track.*

Mr. Foxe had been coming to these team events since his kid was a freshman, and maybe this was just another one of those. And whatever happened had nothing to do with him still supporting the team.

Except it was all wrong. Mr. Foxe shouldn't be here tonight.

Pike watched him circle around, looking like he was having some fun out there, bopping a little bit to the music. They were playing oldies, and Pike guessed he and Mrs. Foxe knew the words too.

Finally they took a break and Mr. Foxe took off his skates and told his wife he was going to the men's room.

Pike followed him.

Mr. Foxe was at one of the sinks. He'd just rinsed off his face and was washing his hands when he saw Pike in the mirror, standing behind him.

He dried his hands and turned around. "Hello son," he said.

Pike was silent.

"I know you replaced my boy and all," Mr. Foxe continued, "but that has no bearing on the fact you've had a helluva season . . . So congratulations. You've earned it, you deserve it." He offered to shake hands.

Pike didn't answer, but took a step-and-a-half forward and grabbed Mr. Foxe by the hair. With his other hand he grabbed his neck. He squeezed his windpipe. Mr. Foxe gasped and turned red, and then began to turn white.

Someone started yelling for Pike to let him go. It was one of the players, Pike didn't know who, and he didn't pay attention.

Soon three or four players were yelling at him, grabbing at him. He heard Marty Clarke's voice in there now: "Gillette, it's not worth it!" . . . and Pike let go of Mr. Foxe.

A couple things occurred to him driving home.

One, that felt good, no point denying it.

Two, he could have killed Mr. Foxe. Easily. Without realizing it, without meaning to . . . This needed to be a wake-up call.

Pike was sitting on his bed debating, should he call Audrey. It was twenty to twelve. Not call her to tell her about the thing with Foxe's dad tonight, though she may have already heard about it. But to feel her out, is it still hot and heavy with Hannamaker.

Part of him wanted to call Cathy too. He'd never thanked her after he met Reggie Riley, didn't give her any report on it, didn't even confirm that it happened. He was pretty damn sure she wasn't interested in a report though.

Cathy looked to be going with Julio Sandoval now, a Venezuelan kid who for whatever reason ended up at school this year. He was a nice guy, played soccer, and smart, was taking AP courses, which Pike could never touch with a ten foot pole.

It was hard to tell if it was serious, but it was still tough seeing them together. Of course the other side of it was Cathy was better off, he knew that.

So he ruled out calling her, but was still debating should he at least touch base with Audrey . . . when the phone buzzed and it was Mitch. *God dang it.*

"What handed are you?" Mitch said.

"Huh?"

"Righty or lefty, come on."

"Anyone tell you you've got weird questions late at night? . . . Well I throw right-handed."

"Oh," Mitch said. He sounded deflated.

"Why?"

"Ah it's nothing then. Thought I was onto a little something . . . But back to the drawing board."

Pike said, "To answer you more completely, I'm ambidextrous."

"Oh yeah?" Mitch was perking back up. "How about batting, in baseball?"

"Leftie."

"Writing?"

"Left."

"Painting?"

"Well, painting a picture, left . . . painting a house, right."

"Kicking a ball?"

"Both."

"Eating?"

"Right." Pike was wondering now if Mitch was going to ask him how he wiped his ass too.

"Cause what we got," Mitch said, "is all lefties so far, and you, who's in the ballpark . . . The Texas guy, plus Florida plus Utah . . . All southpaws."

“Sheesh,” Pike said. “This is what you needed to wake me up for?”

“I believe it may hold some significance. Not sure what, yet.”

“Did you . . . place . . . that thing?”

“Yeah I got a guy. Lab in Culver City . . . We’ll find out. Talk to you later.”

Pike remembered Pocatello was on Mountain Time, which was an hour ahead. That meant instead of it being around midnight here, it would be five to one out there.

Still, for a Friday night that didn’t seem too late, did it?

Dani sounded sleepy. “Ooh, I woke you up,” Pike said. “Don’t be lying to me that I didn’t.”

“You did,” she said. “What’s up?”

“Are you lefthanded?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Okay,” he said.

“*Okay?*”

“Not a big deal,” he said. “Just thought I’d check on that.”

“Has anyone told you you’re peculiar?” Dani said. But there was a familiar playfulness in her voice, and it was good to hear.

Chapter 33

Kids were looking at Pike funny Monday morning, as word obviously got around about the incident at the skating place.

By lunchtime the topic had started to wane and by the end of the day it was a non-issue.

Pike feared something out of Coach at practice regarding it, especially since Coach had warned him after the Hannameker thing. But Coach didn't bring it up. Pike thought either Coach didn't want to screw up the sectionals now by following through and disciplining him, or, more likely, Coach probably agreed with what he did, even though he would never say so.

Pike never did speak to Audrey Friday night. He got thrown off when Mitch called, and then before he knew it Sunday rolled around, and he had to do this family thing in Bakersfield which took forever, and by then it seemed like a good idea to leave her alone.

He saw her a couple times on Tuesday, but she didn't make eye contact with him. Same thing on Wednesday, when he saw her in the school library after seventh period. Pike was killing time before practice, checking Facebook but also googling 'left handed brain'. He'd tried a few general left-handed searches after Mitch dropped that thing on him but the results were way too complicated. So he was trying to narrow it down to left-handed *something or others*.

Anyhow, Audrey was down one of the aisles pulling a book off a shelf. Pike gave her a tentative little wave, and she didn't respond and went back to her business. It was tough to gauge, but Pike was pretty sure she was mad at him. Or disappointed in him, or both.

The sectional quarterfinal was Saturday. Hamilton was hosting the game, but if they won, the semis and finals would be on the road. They had a good record, 7 and 2, and they did run the table in league, but their CCF conference wasn't considered that strong, so teams with worse records got seeded higher, something Coach got hot about and tried to email an official about, but really you couldn't do anything about it.

Pike was turning the key in his car door after practice on Thursday, and there was Audrey. She looked a little messed up, now that he had a good look at her in the late afternoon light, and Pike wondered if she'd been sleeping okay . . . There could be nightmares as well, he hadn't even thought about that.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey back,” she said. “Pike . . . I’ve been wanting to speak to you.” *Uh oh.*

“Before we get into that,” he said, “let me make a preemptive strike.”

“You don’t have to . . . I ended it with Jack . . . if that affects anything at all.”

Wow. It took Pike a moment to process this one. “Huh . . . So you’re not going to ream me out, about Mr. Foxe? . . . Or that comes next.”

“Why would I?” she said.

Man, he read the room wrong. What a relief.

“No reason,” he said. “Does that mean . . . you may want to do something again?”

“Yes . . . This time I promise, you can tell me all your secrets. I won’t run away.”

Pike said, “That’s good then, because I don’t have any.”

Audrey said, “I bet you do.” There was a little gleam in her eye, and Pike’s earlier impression of her not looking her best went out the window.

Pike went home but he asked Audrey if she wanted to study after dinner at Starbucks and she said she’d look forward to it.

The last thing he felt like doing tonight was studying, but he knew this was the only way he’d get her to go somewhere on a school night. She was very conscientious. He wondered if she still had her heart set on going back east to college, but it wasn’t something he was going to bring up.

He wolfed down a quick dinner and picked Audrey up at 7. Mr. Milburn waved hello from the living room. He was sitting there in his recliner watching a sitcom that had a lot of processed laughter. He was drinking something that looked like bourbon or whiskey out of a thick glass with ice. Pike couldn’t blame him.

When they got in the car Audrey said, “You noticed my dad . . . He never used to drink. Just once in a while a lite beer.

Pike felt awful for the guy, couldn’t imagine the range of anger and emotion running through his veins. “It were me,” he said, “I’d try to stay blitzed as much as possible, honestly . . . Except when old man Foxe showed his face.”

Audrey let out a sigh. “I appreciate what you did the other night, I really do. I just can’t allow myself to think that way.”

Pike said, “What . . . you don’t agree with your dad and me, that the man shouldn’t be walking around?”

“I . . . I just don’t know,” she said. “In a perfect world . . .” She started tearing up. Pike thought about stopping the car, but maybe letting her go wasn’t the worst thing. She had to put on the good face at school all day and around town, so her real emotion probably needed to come out more than she was letting it.

“Oh believe me,” he said, “if I could somehow create a perfect world, Mr. Foxe wouldn’t be in it.”

Audrey was crying full on, was holding his arm now, when his phone buzzed and it was Mitch. This was irritating, but now it seemed a good idea for a couple of reasons to pull over.

They were on Cypress Street a few blocks from Starbucks and Pike shut off the engine. Audrey took her seat belt off and slid next to him, and Pike put his arm around her and took Mitch’s call.

“Slow down,” Pike said, after Mitch started in.

“Are you sure?” Pike said. “When?”

“You said you trusted the place,” he said.

“Okay take it easy, we’ll figure it out, it’s not the end of the world,” Pike said, and hung up with Mitch.

Audrey lifted her head off Pike’s chest and took a good look at him.

She said, “See this is the thing.”

“Huh?” he said.

“I mean you received a similar phone call that other time too . . . At least your reaction seemed just as strange.”

“And your question is . . . Are you a secret agent or something,” Pike said.

“Well, you must admit, that wouldn’t be entirely off base . . . Would it?”

Pike pulled her close so she would hopefully relax again.

“Fine,” he said. “I can see how it sounds a little off, and it is . . . Nothing to worry about, nothing illegal or anything like that . . . I’m helping this old guy in L.A. take care of something . . . And you have to believe me, that we’re better off all around leaving it at that.”

They sat there in silence for a while and Pike stroked her hair and Audrey’s spirits seemed to improve. He wasn’t much of a comedian but he tried joking around a bit, and she laughed, though he was pretty sure it was out of politeness.

So he said, “Are you tickle-ish?”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “Why would you ask that?”

“Because I’m going to find out.” He started working her under the armpits and she didn’t react at first. “See? I’m not,” she said.

But he kept going, found the sweet spot apparently because she couldn’t control herself, couldn’t stop laughing and was thrashing around trying to get away from his fingers.

“That’s more like it,” he said.

“You’re a piece of work, you know that?” she said. But she was smiling comfortably now, and it was great to see, even temporarily.

“So then,” he said, “all set to go do homework?”

Audrey was back in his arms, and it was tight quarters, the two of them kind of wedged together against the driver’s door and the steering wheel.

“That’s certainly one option,” she said. “Or we could just hang out here . . . that would work too.”

“Nah, let’s go study.”

“Oh . . . all right then.”

“Jeez, I’m kidding,” Pike said. “What do you think I am?”

Audrey nestled in tight and the car wasn’t a bad place at all tonight, and for a couple hours life was very good . . . such as it was.

Chapter 34

Before he went to bed he called Mitch.

“Give me that again, in case I missed something?” Pike said. “I couldn’t concentrate that well before.”

“What part of it is so hard to understand?” Mitch said. “This a-hole says he lost it.”

“The filling.”

“What the hell else are we talking about here!” Mitch sounded like he was slurring his words slightly. He and Mr. Milburn both now.

“The guy you knew . . . at the lab?”

“I didn’t *know* anybody at the lab. I *trusted* this place, is all I can tell you.”

Pike was trying to visualize the whole thing. “So . . . you go to pick up the test results . . . and the . . . item . . . And you get zip all around?”

Mitch said, “I call, they act weird. Even though today’s when they told me they’d have it. Thursday . . . So I go in. The manager, the chief tech, whatever the frig he is, he makes a point of greeting me right away.”

“So something’s up.”

“It’s like he’s rehearsed it . . . his deepest apologies but there’s apparently been a mix-up, and we’ve been ‘unable to re-locate your sample’ . . . You believe this worm?”

“First losing it, or pretending to,” Pike said. “Then having to talk like that.”

“Son,” Mitch said, “pretending to is where we’re at. We both know what they found.”

Pike had no idea, but it was tough seeing Mitch this upset, especially after all he’d been trying to do to help him get to the bottom of whatever this was.

“Okay I’m going to come down,” Pike said. “We’ll speak to the man, and we’ll straighten it out.”

There was a measured determination in the way Pike said it that startled Mitch for a second.

“No. I’ll figure out something,” he said. “You got high school and everything. You didn’t sign up for this.”

Pike was thinking *you got that right, I didn’t sign up for turning into alt-Superman either.*

“We have a playoff game Saturday,” Pike said. “I’m free after that . . . this lab, when’s it open?”

Mitch wasn’t going to fight him. If the kid wanted to come down, so be it. He looked it up. “It says they’re open straight, Monday through Friday.”

“Or . . .” Pike was saying. “We could speak to this manager person . . . outside the lab . . . Any idea where he might live?”

Holy Mackerel, Mitch thought. *Where’s this kid going with this?*

“Okay let’s not go off the deep end here,” Mitch said. But he was fingering the guy’s card. He’d picked one up, out of the plastic tray they had on the counter, after the guy told him to his face that he was out of luck.

Mitch’s thought was to report the guy and the lab, but then what would you say? And who would you report it to? That would probably cause more trouble than you already had. And then for sure you’d never see that filling again.

But yeah, he had the guy’s name. Wayne Lukaris.

He said, “And if we somehow did find him . . . as you say, ‘outside of the lab’ . . . then what?”

“I’m not sure,” Pike said, but with that same matter-of-fact and almost eerily confident tone.

Pike said he had to go, and Mitch poured himself another scotch and soda, sat back down at the computer, and started looking around.

Chapter 35

It was Saturday, November now, the 5th, and it was nippy as Hamilton took the field to warm up for the sectional opener against Highland High School from Coddington.

It felt more or less like a regular home game, except there were advertising banners around the perimeter of the field that announced the 'Official Corporate Partners of the 2016 WCALF Sectional Playoffs'.

There was also a more professional PA announcer tonight. Mr. Gerund, the auto shop teacher, had been doing it all season, but the truth was he was pretty shaky, getting names mixed up and even getting the score mixed up a bunch of times. So they had someone else take over.

Pike focused enough to get the job done. He didn't have to do much. Highland was maybe the worst team they played all year, and in the locker room celebration after, Coach got asked about that by a media person, and he said they were tougher than they looked but it was deceptive because we put it all together and controlled the game.

That was ridiculous of course. Highland was 4 and 5 on the season coming in, should never have been in any playoffs, but you couldn't control who you played, you just went with the hand you were dealt.

Pike got to thinking: *In fact it would be nice if that applied to stuff outside of football too, you go with the hand you're dealt. But of course it wasn't that simple.*

Even though it was an easy game there was a festive mood around town afterwards, since Hamilton over the years hadn't won a lot of playoff football games.

There were parties lining up and Pike asked Audrey what she wanted to do, and she said honestly, she love to go to the movies. Pike thought that sounded good too, for other reasons, namely less chance of him getting into some kind of trouble, which was following him around lately.

So they went to the Multiplex 6, in Orlande. Big place, you could roam around and they didn't check tickets once you were in, so Audrey and Pike started with one called *Night Moving Jerry*, about a guy in New York City who starts a moving business that only works at night, because the traffic's too bad the rest of the time.

Pike decided that wasn't a bad idea. Go against the grain. Stuff builds up though, and Jerry has to start reacting, and he gets in over his head . . . Some of it was a little unreal, but it kept your interest, and Audrey said so too.

Then they sneaked into one that was supposed to be a comedy, but it had a serious undertone, and plenty of sex and violence. Pike was concerned how Audrey might feel about all that these days, especially the violence, whether it might hit home, but she seemed okay and said she enjoyed it.

This would have been a typical night you go somewhere else now, things just getting started, but Pike took her home. He told her he had to drive to Manhattan Beach in the morning, to help that older friend.

Which was the truth, though he left out the specifics. Audrey politely wished him a safe trip, and kissed him goodnight. She didn't ask any more questions. Pike hoped he could level with her at some point and tell her, but there was a good chance that would never happen.

Sunday morning he left at 5, got down there at 8:30. Mitch was in the same spot on the pier, that same bench, the volleyball to the left, the surfers to the right, the Hermosa Beach pier in the distance.

"Traffic this time, or you beat it?" Mitch said.

"Beat it . . . so what do we got?" Pike said.

Mitch had found the guy, this Wayne Lukaris. Luckily his name wasn't that common, plus he was listed the old-fashioned way, according to Mitch.

"Online white pages," he said. "Getting rarer these days. Landline phone number and address right there on the screen . . . The mope lives in Santa Monica."

"So we ring the bell," Pike said, "or what?"

"That'd be one way." Pike could see Mitch was into this now. He'd cooled down a notch from the other night, but he was still plenty mad.

"And the other," Pike said, "follow him someplace?"

"Then talk to him, yeah . . . If that proved to be a better fit."

Pike said, "You're starting to crack me up."

Mitch waved his hand, like let's not get carried away.

"First things first," he said. "My prediction is you're hungry . . . how did I know that?"

"Well I liked that place from last time," Pike said. "I'll pay." Which he could do, if neither of them ordered too much.

"Not the way it works," Mitch said. "You're on my turf, you don't open your wallet."

Mitch was a good man. Pike felt a twinge of guilt for getting irritated at him. They went back to The Kettle, three blocks up Manhattan Beach Boulevard on the corner.

Mitch asked how football was going.

“We’re in the semis of our little sectionals,” Pike said. “I realize I’d be more effective playing linebacker.”

“You got *that* right,” Mitch said. “But quarterback’s more fun.”

“It can be . . . Thing is, it doesn’t translate 100 percent to my . . . new skillset. I mean I can gun the ball all over the field, but it’s not always easy to catch.”

Mitch said, “If you ran it more, it would be interesting watching guys try to bring you down though . . . Of course that would attract plenty of attention.”

“Yeah, the wrong kind,” Pike said. “On defense I could do more that looked normal.”

“And still do damage, you mean.”

“I guess, yeah, if I was careful.”

“Well pro ball used to be different than it is now,” Mitch said. “There was an unwritten merit system for knock-outs. Now the concussion rules have changed all that.”

“Speaking of that,” Pike said, “That one dude? Who I tackled and had to go to the hospital? The game where I first noticed my thing? I heard he quit football.”

“So you’re correct, it’s just as well you aren’t playing linebacker.”

“Okay, forget football right now,” Pike said. “How would someone time travel?”

“Gee,” Mitch said, “you *are* actually interested in this.”

“Travel at the speed of light is what I read. Would that really be one way?”

“Ahh, well not to get too technical, but that theory extends back to Einstein . . . Let’s say you were in a spaceship moving at the speed of light. And you had an identical twin who stayed on earth. You would age significantly more slowly than he would.”

“So?”

“That’s the foundation anyhow. It gets a lot more complicated . . . Wormholes, cosmic strings, closed curves such as Godel spacetime.”

“Ah,” Pike said.

“Don’t stress out trying to comprehend it all . . . Plus there may be another way. Not in the vocabulary of typical mainstream science, but right here in the noggin!” Mitch’s eyes were wide for emphasis, and he was pointing to the side of his head.

Pike said, “Oh no. Give me a break.”

“You say that,” Mitch said, “but the Russians in particular, in the 60’s, made some astounding discoveries about the power of the mind . . . Our government won’t admit it, but the army and the CIA use remote viewers. You know what those are?”

“Nope.”

“People who can tap into the part of the brain that can see what’s going on in other parts of the world . . . You combine that ability with a parallel universe, and you may very well be dealing with time travel.”

Pike cringed as he finished his blueberry muffin.

“I know,” Mitch said, “a lot to consume.”

“I’m quite sure I don’t believe Reggie Riley,” Pike said. “But . . . just supposing I gave him the benefit of the doubt . . . he said his brother went out back of the mess hall or something . . . how would *that* work?”

“Hard to know. He may have either tapped into some portal, or created one on his own.”

“Oh my God,” Pike said. “. . . Anyways, this lab person, how shall we handle it, do you think?”

“Good question. I tend the favor the direct approach, until proven otherwise.”

“Fine,” Pike said. “Hopefully it won’t take long, and I can get a move on back home. My girlfriend is curious.”

“I thought she knew.”

“Naw, this is a new one. Not going to make the mistake of telling her too. Or anyone else, hopefully.” He was thinking about Dani, but didn’t bring that up.

Mitch said the guy lived on Chelsea Avenue, a block off Wilshire Boulevard, not too far from UCLA. They took the coastal route from Manhattan Beach, up through El Segundo and Marina del Rey.

It took them a half hour to get there. “Okay now let me do the talking,” Mitch said.

Pike said, “Fine. Provided we’ve got the right guy, and he’s home, and he doesn’t slam the door in our face.”

“Yeah, a lot of *ifs*,” Mitch said, looking a little nervous as they got out of the car and crossed the street.

It was a fourplex, you went into a lobby that didn’t require a key and then you found your apartment. They didn’t see a bell for A-2, so Mitch knocked.

A little girl opened the door, about eight years old, which didn't seem responsible, but a woman was right behind her. "Can I help you?" she said, pleasant.

"Uh, yes please, and I hope I have the right address . . . I was looking for Wayne?"

Wayne appeared, in sweats and slippers, holding a coffee mug. He recognized Mitch, Pike could tell, but he pretended not to.

"Yes, Wayne," Mitch said. "Mitch Corrigan? From the other day?"

Wayne kept the pretense up for a moment and then said, "Oh yes, I believe I remember you . . . A customer, correct?"

"Yep," Mitch said.

"It gets quite hectic at times, which I'm sure you can imagine," Wayne said. "At any rate, is there something I can do for you?"

Mitch said, "There is actually . . . We have some more information on that sample . . . We'd be glad to share it with you, if you can spare a few minutes."

Pike was hoping Wayne wouldn't invite them in, though that's where Mitch seemed to be going with it.

Wayne deliberated a moment and said, "Well, I suppose, if you feel this is so vital . . . Please give me a second." He closed the door, and Pike figured he was changing and getting ready to come outside, that he didn't want his family involved in this, and Wayne did just that.

"We could take a ride, I can show you where I'm going with this," Mitch said.

Wayne said, "How about a walk?"

Mitch said that would work also, and the three of them went to the end of the block and turned left.

"This is my nephew by the way," Mitch said to Wayne. Pike smiled and shook hands with Wayne, going easy on him but still making sure he screwed up a finger or two.

Pike said it was good to meet him.

Wayne looked alarmed, and in quite a bit of pain, no doubt about that. Mitch said, "You okay?"

Nothing from Wayne. "See here's the thing," Mitch said. "What happened to that filling?"

Pike took a step closer to Wayne. "I had nothing to do with that, I swear on a stack of Bibles," Wayne said. "All's I did, I reported it to the head office . . . which we're required to do . . . when something doesn't add up."

Mitch said, "And then they swooped in, middle of the night, and stole it . . . When you came to work in the morning the filling was AWOL."

"Yes," Wayne insisted, "that's pretty close to what really *did* happen!"

"You know what?" Mitch said. "You're a piss-poor liar."

"What was in it?" Pike said.

"Excuse me?" Wayne said.

"Well you got mercury, silver . . . what else . . . tin, and copper, if I remember it right," Pike said. "Under normal circumstances."

"Yes, that *is* correct," Wayne said. "And we determined those elements to be present."

"What else was *present*," Mitch said. "According to your very professional . . . determination?"

"That was the spectrum," Wayne said.

Pike grabbed Wayne by the right earlobe. Not much there in the way of nerve endings, but Pike figured he could pull Wayne's ear off if he gave it some downward effort. Of course then you'd have a mess, and the police sooner or later.

The idea, Pike was deciding on the fly, was to make Wayne think he *might* pull his ear off.

"All right, please now!" Wayne said. It hadn't taken long, and Pike let go.

"So you had something to add?" Mitch said.

Wayne was sweating quite profusely, and holding his right hand with his left. "There was something we couldn't identify," Wayne said, very quietly now.

Mitch and Pike let that one settle. It was what they both suspected, even Pike by now. But there was something about hearing it this way, having it verified, that was a heavy load to process.

After a minute Mitch said to Wayne, "Enjoy your day. And when you find it, I'll be waiting to get it back."

They watched Wayne kind of stagger down the block and turn the corner out of sight.

"Anyhow," Mitch said, "you hungry again yet? There's a Chinese place on Wilshire that I always like."

"You want to know the truth," Pike said, "yeah, I'm starved out of my mind."

Chapter 36

Driving home, Pike was thinking it didn't matter really, did it (?), whether Mitch ever got the filling back, or to what extent the guy may be lying.

Of course it mattered if there was actually something (Pike hated to admit it but was having trouble avoiding the real possibility now) that was *unworldly* in the god dang thing.

But the fact that Wayne admitted there was something in there they couldn't identify . . . That was a nugget you had to deal with, whether you had the filling back or not.

Also, if Wayne never produced the filling, Mitch would have to figure something out with the Texas guy, and if he had to give him more money to settle things Pike would try to pay that, if he could. He could scramble and try to work more Sundays for Mac's Dad.

The main thing now, if his dentist and Dani's and probably Reggie Riley's brother's one . . . and the Texas's guy's and the Florida and Utah people's . . . if all those dentists stuck the same shit in each of their mouths, where did it come from?

Pike stopped for gas and called Mitch. "I'm with you," Mitch said. "And I'm ahead of you . . . I'm working on it, where dental offices get their amalgam . . . Is there one standard source, a hundred sources--what?"

"And to take it a step further," Pike said, "maybe, was the Texas person's source the same as my source . . . in Albuquerque, I mean."

"You're preaching to the converted," Mitch said. "Which I appreciate. But go back to football and school and girlfriends. You have enough on your menu . . . I got this."

Mitch was right, but when Pike got home he texted Dani. He felt like catching her up, plus it was an excuse to say hello. She didn't answer or get back to him the rest of the night, at least not by 10 when Pike hit the sack. He was more than shot from the day's festivities, and barely moved a muscle for nine hours.

Chapter 37

Monday Pike was talking to Marty Clarke at lunch in the main quad when his phone rang and it was Dani.

“You caught me off guard,” he said. “How are you?” Pike turned his back on Clarke and waved him away, trying to show he needed privacy.

“I have a 20-minute,” Dani said, “and I’m returning your message.”

“Yeah . . . well I appreciate that . . . I need to fill you in on something . . . it’s private, now’s not the best time.”

“That’d be fine,” Dani said. “Please don’t think I forgot about you last night.”

“No big deal at all. I was wiped out anyway, so I went to sleep.”

“The reason,” she said, “is I’m dating someone. I’m very excited.”

“Oh no,” Pike said.

“I know what you’re thinking . . . please don’t go there?”

“I won’t . . . this other thing, you’ll want to hear it about it I think.”

“Fine. Call me tonight. The best time’s around 9:30.”

“I will. I’ll look forward to it.”

“Me too. Have a good rest of the day . . . I miss you, by the way.”

“I miss you too,” he said, and got off.

“*That* sounded interesting,” a girl’s voice said, from off to the right. It was Audrey, unfortunately.

Marty Clarke had left, and Audrey had shown up now, giving him space, and patiently waiting while he finished his call. Things would have been better if he knew she was there.

Pike fumbled around, starting to talk and then stopping. Finally he just said, “That wasn’t what you think. Not even close.”

The bell rang, and Audrey was in no hurry to get inside, nor was Pike.

“Fair enough,” she said. “The funny thing is, I believe you . . . or at least I wish to believe you.” Her voice went up high on the second *you*, Pike thinking that’s all the poor girl needs right now.

He said, “This is an older woman . . . sort of a long-lost cousin . . . She’s going through some stuff, it’s hard to explain.”

“I see . . . *How* old exactly,” Audrey said, “if I’m not prying too deeply?”

“26.” Pike remembered it from the newspaper. There was no point in lying about it.

Audrey was giving it some thought. “Was this . . . cousin-person, part of your recruiting trip? Where you flew out to the college and such?”

“Sort of,” Pike said. He wanted to disappear. If he could tell her the whole thing . . . not an option though.

“I did wonder a bit, why you didn’t return my text.”

It took Pike a second to place this, and then he remembered he never got back to her from the Saturday football game out there. He was so focused on Dani that he forgot. Maybe that was part of why she’d picked up again with Hannamker when he got back from Utah.

These things didn’t take much to go sideways. It was all about communication, obviously. And *unfortunately*.

“That was my fault,” Pike tried, “not answering you from out there . . . There was no excuse for that, but can you please accept that this person had nothing to do with it?”

To his shock, Audrey smiled and said, “I accept,” and she put her arms around his back and locked her hands.

Pike looked down at her and ran his fingers through her hair.

“Jeez, what a relief,” he said. “And pretty amazing actually. *I* wouldn’t have accepted it, that’s for sure.”

Audrey shot him a slightly mischievous look, but she was still smiling, and they kissed each other goodbye and hustled to class.

Chapter 38

That night at dinner there was something funky going on between his mom and his dad. Bo and Jackie were goofing around like usual, grabbing each other's food and popping up and down for no reason, and playing a version of tag right in the middle of dinner. They had all this energy they needed to burn. Pike remembered those days, but was glad he'd slowed down, and was acting more like a man now. At least some of the time.

But the thing here was, his parents were ignoring his brother and sister's shenanigans, which was not their typical MO. They seemed detached tonight, not upset exactly, more like doped up. Reacting slow, kind of going through the motions.

For an instant Pike was sure they'd found out his secret, and were dealing with it in a disbelieving fashion. But common sense said that wasn't realistic. No, that wasn't it.

Much as he hated to even think about it, he wondered if their marriage was okay . . . Maybe there were other signs lately . . . he'd been so dang wrapped up in himself that he wouldn't have noticed if there were.

There was that one thing his dad said, that didn't mean anything at the time, at least on the surface . . . But could there have been something more to it? . . . When his parents were going to the barbeque, and his dad seemed to be preaching to him just a bit, to enjoy yourself now because there's not much to do in this town.

Pike finished up pretty quick and went upstairs to his room. He needed one more thing on his 'menu', as Mitch called it, like he needed a hole in the head. Hopefully his mind was running away from him and was imagining the whole scenario downstairs.

Mitch called around 9:15. Pike hoped he wouldn't be long-winded because he didn't want to screw up getting to Dani at 9:30.

"I been working this business all day," Mitch said. "We got somewhere."

"You didn't go surfing this morning even?" Pike said.

"We got a comedian. Okay, all day after I got out of the ocean . . . that work?"

Pike said it did, wanting to hear something earth-shattering from Mitch, but at the same time not sure he needed to know any more

"Took quite an effort to narrow it down," Mitch said. "So many variables."

Pike was looking at the time. “If you could please bypass the details, and give me the bottom line,” he said.

“It was fascinating actually,” Mitch said. “I started to feel like a detective . . . It didn’t hurt that I used some of the . . . strong arm tactics . . . you employed on Wayne.”

“What are you *talking* about?” Pike said.

“Nothing physical of course, all transacted on the phone, and online. Bottom line, we kept it simple, compared your filling with the Texas one.”

“Come on *please*,” Pike said.

“Two different manufacturers, it turns out. And kind of funny, the Texas supply company is actually in New Mexico, Las Cruces.”

“Oh my God, you’re going to turn this into a two-hour lecture.”

“Fine . . . so your Albuquerque dentist got their amalgam from a company in Louisiana . . . Now you remember what the composition is.”

“I’m going to have to go,” Pike said.

“Okay hold on. Just bear with me here . . . We got mercury, copper, silver and tin . . . Like I said, a full day’s work, not taking no for an answer, waiting on hold for the key people.”

Pike again asked if he could please speed it up.

“So finally, the Louisiana outfit, they fax me a bunch of paperwork. And it’s all there, in the fine print . . . The New Mexico company was a lot rougher. I had to pull out my hole card, which was threaten to expose them for hiding something, if they didn’t break it down for me . . . Bottom-bottom line? Only the silver came from the same source.”

“Oh,” Pike said.

“Yep . . . The mercury was Japan and China, the copper, one was Peru, the other Montana. And the tin, one was from Tasmania, which is an island off Australia, and the other mine, not sure which is which but it doesn’t matter, is in Canada.”

“So the silver, you say?” Pike said, trying to keep Mitch focused. He’d given up on calling Dani tonight.

“Yes, now we’re down to it . . . The specific silver--that both manufacturers used to produce their amalgam--it came from a mine in the southeastern part of the state. New Mexico . . . Specifically a little town called Hillsdale.”

Pike tried to absorb what all this meant, if anything.

“Are you there?” Mitch said. “Still with me?”

“Sort of . . . let me jump around with a couple questions. How come, with probably thousands of people getting this same shit in their cavities, from these same two factories or whatever--we only got a few like me?”

“What was your other question?”

“Only that, yeah, so what? . . . You’re saying there’s some special shit in that silver then?”

“Believe me,” Mitch said, “I’m on it. That’s next . . . On your first concern, yes, there may absolutely be other unique similarities to the test group.”

“*Test group* now,” Pike said.

Mitch said, “What’s your blood type?”

Pike said he didn’t know and had to go.

He didn’t like to be late when he told someone he’d do something but he tried Dani anyway.

“Oh, hi there,” she said. *Uh-oh, not the best greeting.*

Pike said, “Everything’s running together on me. But there have been a few developments.”

“Well, yes, I appreciate your thinking of me in that regard,” she said, *a little too politely.*

“The hell is *that?*” It was a man’s voice in the background, gruff, and slightly muffled.

“I need to go,” Dani said. “And I thank you for your time sir.”

Pike sat there picturing how it might play out. No matter how he tossed it around, it didn’t end well. Not for Dani, and certainly not for the latest Mr. Gruff.

He thought of something that Mrs. Hopper, the sophomore English teacher he liked, would say, when they discussed themes in books. Which Pike was learning you could apply to a whole lot more, too. The expression his teacher used was “Cultivate your own garden”.

I mean what else could you do?

Chapter 39

They were getting ready to play Ramsey Tech in the sectional semifinal. Guys were fired up at practice Tuesday and a few skirmishes broke out, which Coach didn't try to stop. He liked the players on edge, didn't care for them being best friends with each other with the most important game of the season on the line. He thought some healthy brawling built character, was how he put it, though Pike thought that was a bunch of crap.

Part of the reason for the excitement was the Sectionals were doing something different this year. They were putting the semis of Hamilton's division alongside the semis of the Central Coast Section, which would run all day Saturday at Bulldog Stadium, on the campus of Fresno State University.

So their little team from little Beacon would be playing in a Division 1 college building that seated 40,000.

There'd been more news about Mr. Foxe and Mr. Milburn. A reporter for a Bay Area newspaper had been in town poking around, and then now there's this big article he writes on the whole situation that has everyone talking.

It was developing into the kind of nonsense you see on those shows like Dateline and 20/20 that his mom and sister were always watching.

The reporter played up the angle of Mr. Milburn going after Mr. Foxe, *trying to kill him twice*, was how he labeled it. Also bringing in the part now where Foxe gets a fancy lawyer who is putting the unsophisticated Beacon police department through the ringer. Forcing them a million ways to back up it being drunk driving. According to the lawyer, the police procedure that night broke all kinds of rules. Which wouldn't surprise Pike, unfortunately.

Meanwhile the newspaper article makes Mr. Milburn look like some kind of monster, like a time bomb ticking down to explode as he waits his opportunity to take another crack at Mr. Foxe.

The reporter tried to speak to Pike because he had heard about Pike having the original fight with Foxe in the backyard, and then following it up by scaring Mr. Foxe at the skate rink. The reporter was thorough, Pike had to give him that, but he didn't say a word to the guy.

Either way, more bad all around for Audrey and Hailey, though for whatever reason, Hailey seemed to be handling the tragedy better than Audrey. Pike supposed that's the way it worked, that one sister probably would, while the other carried the brunt of it for years.

As for Mr. Milburn paying the price, Pike had seen it in movies and even a few books where the victim keeps on getting the worst of it. It never seemed believable in fiction, but here you were.

Pike was still trying to wrap his mind around what Mitch had come up with, and what it all might mean.

And the lefthanded stuff, and *Criminy*, now the blood type business.

Though he couldn't help it, he was intending to ask Dani her blood type last night, and he would have for sure if the new dude she was hooked up with didn't interfere.

Is that how it was shaping up? *Okay, let's go out on a limb and say the silver from the same New Mexico mine, if that's what it was, that he and the Texas guy were apparently carrying around--let's say Dani miraculously had the same silver in her mouth. Let's say the Florida and Utah people did too. As well as Reggie Riley's brother, even though he was probably hallucinating about an alien implant.*

Again, that doesn't add up. You'd be hearing about hundreds more, at least, all experiencing the same shit.

So what, there's more layers to it now? Lefthanded, same blood type, or if not that, something else unique in their bodies that opens them up vulnerable to the effect of some weird silver?

But that's exactly where Mitch was going, wasn't he.

Again tonight when Pike got home from practice there wasn't the greatest vibe around the house. His mom and dad were cordial to each other, but they barely interacted.

Pike said he had to take care of something and would miss dinner, and he went to McDonald's. He liked the dollar menu, and was able to scarf down three burgers without spending a lot.

It was comfortable there, he was nice and satisfied now, and what was the rush going back home, so he started googling around.

He tried: **alien silver New Mexico.**

The top result was something called 'Roswell Silver'. Which turned out to be a silly 14 dollar coffee mug sold by the local Walmart down there. It had a drawing of an alien's head on the side of it.

Pike had heard of Roswell though, never paid attention to it, but looked that up now. First you had a TV series called Roswell from 2001. Pike wasn't familiar with it and realized he would have been two years old, so no wonder. He skimmed over the plot description, and it looked like you had aliens disguised as humans, going to the high school down there. *Oh no . . .*

But there was more on Roswell besides the idiot TV show. Its claim to fame apparently was something crashed there, outside of town on someone's ranch, in 1947. There was a cult following now, of UFO people like Mitch.

There were photocopies of two different newspaper articles from back then. The first announced a flying saucer had crashed. The second a couple days later said that was wrong, it was only a weather balloon.

That made sense to Pike, of course. People want to believe in stuff, but you're always going to find a logical explanation. *Aren't you?*

Except what he couldn't quite get past, was if it was only a weather balloon why was the government there, and securing the area, and hanging around for days? Which is what seemed like happened.

Pike called Mitch. "What would they be doing in New Mexico?" he said.

Mitch laughed. "Good to hear you're on track," he said. "Saucers? Well, there's one line of thought, a pretty compelling one I might add, that they were interested in our nuclear weapons . . . You know the world's first nuclear test was down there in 1945 right? In White Sands."

Pike said he didn't know that.

"I'm guessing you're asking about Roswell," Mitch said, "the well-known incident. I'm not discounting it, but that's a story for another day . . . Our thing now, what about this silver mine in Hillsdale? I put out an APB on my website today."

"What's an APB?" Pike said.

"All points bulletin. Old police term."

"Oh . . . and you're looking for *what*, exactly, from your . . . followers."

"Simply if anyone has knowledge, hearsay or otherwise, of a UFO incident around Hillsdale."

"That a UFO . . . decided to put a spell on their little silver mine? . . . And that's why I'm screwed up?"

“You make fun of the concept,” Mitch said, “though I can feel you at least going back and forth now . . . One thing that’s hard to ignore, is your Mr. Riley’s brother . . . When he insisted an alien messed with his teeth, we in the UFO community take that quite seriously . . . That even though he may have indeed visited a dentist, as you did, a sixth sense likely told him a supernatural influence was involved.”

Pike was getting a headache. He said, “So this APB . . . anyone answer?”

“Not yet. Something else I verified--the mine closed in ‘54. For a long time. Decades. They opened it again in 1997.”

“Okay . . . so then anyone could have got in there in those, what, forty years . . . and did something to that silver . . . contaminated it, or what not . . . Even a terrorist, for all we know . . . Why the heck are you so sure outer space stuff was involved?”

“I just am,” Mitch said.

Chapter 40

The team got on the bus at school Friday and spent the night at a motel in Clovis, which was across the freeway from the Fresno State campus.

Pike had received some mild interest from one of the Fresno State coaches, but going here would be a whole lot different than Western Utah . . . Not that Western Utah was a possibility anymore, but still.

The Fresno deal was you had traffic, malls and strip malls, stop lights and cement. A place like Utah, you had mountains and green and wide open spaces.

Anyhow . . . the motel part was fun and he roomed with Clarke. There was another team staying there, Wickenger out of Visalia, from the other conference, playing their own semifinal, and they had some nice guys. It was refreshing to just kick back with them and get his mind off everything else.

They had a team breakfast, and before it was over Coach got up and asked for quiet, and thanked everyone for being a part of it. He added the usual BS about *just go out there and have fun*.

And then he had trouble finishing. He kind of choked up and started breaking down. Pike and Clarke looked at each other, like *this is over the top*, but if it made Coach feel good to get so emotional, what could you do.

Unfortunately, at the main event, the game, no one for Hamilton had much fun. Ramsey Tech was too strong, had too many stud athletes on both sides of the ball.

Pike was trying to keep them in it, was throwing it well, moving the chains. But guys weren't open enough, as they were being shadowed and smothered by the Ramsey defenders. It was rough to complete much downfield, and Pike had to settle for chipping away short.

Meanwhile Ramsey came at you all different ways when they had the ball. It unfortunately felt like men playing against boys after a while.

Pike was tempted to ask Coach to put him in on defense, so he could help stop the bleeding, so to speak. But he knew that was only asking for trouble, since either he held back and Ramsey continued dominating, or he stepped it up and started hospitalizing guys with savage tackles, which would only draw scrutiny. And Hamilton was too far behind to come back anyway, so it wouldn't even make a difference.

The game ended, mercifully, and Hamilton lost by 42, 63-21.

Pike looked around as he walked off the field. It was weird being down here, playing in a legit college stadium after being in the stands as a spectator at Western Utah. Maybe it was true, this place really held 40,000. But there were what, 2 or 3 thousand here, tops? You had a scattering of Hamilton kids and parents who made the trip down, the same for the other team, and then there were the fans for the next game who'd gotten there early.

The whole thing was kind of bittersweet, and Pike wondered if this was the last football game he'd be playing.

He didn't know it until they'd showered and were outside the locker room saying hi to people, that Audrey had come down.

Pike gave her a long hug. "I'm awfully sorry," she said. There was a tragic tone the way she said it, Pike thought, and now he was wondering if she was building up to breaking up with him.

Luckily she only meant she was sorry about the game. But she looked so sad . . . so down.

Pike told her first of all, forget about the dumb game. He tried to say a few things to her, distract her, get her to lighten up even a *little*. But it was tough.

They were into early November, today was the 12th. So what did that make it . . . six weeks, since she lost her mom?

Pike was thinking, *Now's when the real grind starts, isn't it? . . . The state of shock is over, and now you're facing the real world. And it can't be a pretty sight.*

He hated to consider it, but the reality was, Audrey might never be completely happy again.

Still, he got permission from Coach to ride back with her, instead of on the team bus, and he once again admired her for putting up a brave front, and by the time they hit the Beacon turnoff they were at least having a few laughs, here and there.

Chapter 41

It was Sunday and Pike was laying around on the couch flipping channels.

Everything was anticlimactic all of a sudden. No more games to look forward to, no more practices, which even though no one really liked them, you got used to in a funny way.

No more walking around school on Mondays with people coming up to you and saying *good game*, even teachers.

College for next fall was a total question mark . . . Now there were six months left to be a high school kid. Pike supposed that was a good thing, but he couldn't get past feeling deflated today and out of whack.

The text came in from Mitch around 2. "Bingo," it said.

He'd gotten these *Bingo*-type messages from Mitch before. Some of them were overly-dramatic, but there usually was something concrete there when Mitch got all excited.

This could be a pain in the ass to deal with right now. Pike wasn't in the mood, and he shut off his phone and tried to get into a re-run of Hawaii Five-O. But he couldn't, and he fell into a long, hard sleep, one foot on the couch and the other still flat on the floor, but that didn't matter, he was out.

When he woke up there was more weird news circulating now, disturbing shit. He hadn't even thought about it, but, no, he hadn't seen Foxe, the kid, at school for a while. Now it turns out Foxe may be hooked up with some oxy people over in Salinas. Oxycontin. Mean stuff. The scary word was a couple of them got caught breaking into houses, in Carmel, but that Foxe wasn't one of them.

This was hard to swallow. If even part of it was true, Foxe was screwed. He's either a desperate addict or he's a criminal now. At the very least, he's AWOL from Beacon, and *something* was going on, none of it good.

Pike thought of how when you skip a rock on a flat lake there's always the ripple effect. One terrible moment, that couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds, and now look at Audrey. And Mr. Milburn. You've got Foxe now. Not to mention his old man. And of course Hailey.

The doorbell rang. It was Audrey. She was crying. *Again*.

"Are your parents here?" she said. "I only saw the one car, yours."

“Come on in babe,” Pike said. “We’re good. We’re alone . . . What is it?”

“This is so difficult to tell you,” she said.

Now Pike was genuinely nervous, and he was starting to worry about Audrey’s mental health.

He said, “No. Please. Don’t hold anything back. At this point . . . that’d be the least healthy thing you could do.”

“I know you’re right,” she said. “It’s just so hard . . .”

Pike eased her onto the couch. He was making a mental note to gently suggest, when the timing was right, she see some kind of therapist.

He should have thought of this before.

“My mom’s things,” she said. “It’s been too soon, but today, finally, I had the strength to begin going through them.

“I’m proud of you . . . Has to be brutal, I can’t imagine . . . But you’re doing what’s necessary.”

“There were boxes of letters, and so forth . . . Journals . . . Major diaries . . . I never knew what an excellent writer my mom was. And so prolific.”

“What’s *that* mean?” Pike said.

“It means she wrote an abundant amount . . . Hundreds of journal entries, quite personal, and some very long ones . . .”

Audrey took a deep breath, folded her hands and stared at the floor. “Pike, your dad and my mom were having an affair.”

It took a moment for the words to resonate. When they did, Pike’s legs started to feel weak, and it was as though he was sitting in the easy chair on the other side of the coffee table, detached, watching Audrey converse with some stranger on the couch.

Finally he came up with one word, “When?”

“I’m not sure,” Audrey said. “I had to stop reading . . . there may have been others as well . . .”

She came into his arms. Pike tried to comfort her, but his mind was racing, and she felt so heavy against him.

“Other people . . . ?” he said. not adding, but wondering, *Others for my dad too?*

“I think so . . . and now I’m angry at her . . . Can you believe it? . . . What on earth is wrong with me?”

“There’s nothing the matter with you,” he said, stroking her cheek. “She had her secrets, and she probably had her reasons . . . But you have a right to be upset.”

“Thank you for that,” she said. Her face was soaking wet and her eyes looked badly bloodshot.

“And now unfortunately I’ve got to deal with my dad,” Pike said. “Can you believe it? . . . Ah, I’m sorry . . . I know how that sounded, that didn’t come out right.”

“It’s okay, I understand what you meant.” Audrey was sobbing again though.

Pike was trying to make sense of the timeline, and his parents’ recent behavior.

“When you say you’re not sure when it happened,” he said, “were you able to narrow it down at all? . . . I mean, was it, like . . . going on right when the . . . incident occurred?”

Audrey appeared to think about it. “I don’t think so,” she said. “It seemed to have been well in the past. Something that ran its course.”

Pike realized Audrey may very well be lying to him now, for his benefit. Even through it all, these last six weeks, she managed to put others first. It was one of the several qualities he admired about her.

The other side of it, of course, is maybe it really *was* in the past, and that it wasn’t a full-blown affair but just a mid-life fling type deal.

Which means . . . possibly his parents aren’t getting along right now for *other* reasons. Or Mrs. Milburn’s death got to her dad period, even though their fling was long over.

Maybe. It didn’t matter now, but still, Pike badly wanted it *not* to be true that his dad and Audrey’s mom were hooked up when it happened.

Nothing would be worse than that.

“Are you hungry?” he said. “You want to take a drive?”

The doorbell rang again. *What now?* Pike excused himself for a moment.

Standing there, shorts, sweatshirt, Dodgers cap, big sideways smile . . . Mitch.

“What the HECK?” Pike said.

“Mind if I come in?” Mitch said, stepping inside regardless, not waiting for Pike to answer.

Pike closed the door and introduced Mitch to Audrey, who was standing up and had tried to quickly improve her appearance.

“A pleasure,” Mitch said, letting his eye linger on Audrey. A little *too* long, for Pike’s taste.

Audrey was back to her bubbly, sweet self. To an outsider, she was a typical high school kid having good times her senior year, everything ahead of her, and she and Mitch talked about college and careers and travel (Mitch telling her that backpacking through Europe when he was 18 was the best thing he ever did, and going into way too much detail).

Pike was feeling excluded, but whether she was faking it or not, he could see this was good for Audrey. Finally their life discussion wound down, and she said she had to go, and she gave Mitch a minor hug on the way out, which clearly made the old man's day.

"Wow-ee," Mitch said, when she was gone. "Have you got a winner there."

"Anyway," Pike said. "You hungry? That's what I was in the middle of asking my girlfriend. When you . . . most unexpectedly . . . dropped in. How'd you find me, you don't mind me asking?"

"Online white pages. Same way we tracked down our friend Wayne Lukaris. There was only one Gillette listed in Beacon, and Bingo!"

"You keep using that word, don't say than any more . . . And what, you just decided to take a little Sunday drive?"

"Yeah, well, Melinda's been getting on me. Too much time at the computer. A little break never hurts . . . Plus I want to go over some stuff."

They went to Applebees which Pike figured wasn't the worst thing because it took twenty minutes each way, and Mitch could get whatever he needed to off his chest and then hopefully just leave when they got back.

After Pike finished his club sandwich with a side of chicken wings he said, "I'm more energized now. I can listen better,"

"You don't say," Mitch said. "Appetite has never been your strong suit . . . Of course I'm kidding . . . Incidentally, not the main reason I'm here, but did you know Aaron Rodgers saw a UFO?"

"Wait. The *football* Aaron Rodgers?" Pike said.

"Yeah, there was just an article about it. I'll link it to you right now . . . It happened several years ago, back in New Jersey. Near a power plant . . . A nuclear one . . . Does that sound familiar?"

Pike was skeptical. "What's he doing bringing it up now then?"

"Just that a sportswriter asked him a question that triggered it. Aaron was playing for Cal then, was driving cross-country with a couple of college teammates. They all agree they saw it."

Pike didn't watch a whole lot of pro football but Rodgers was one of his favorite players, and probably his favorite NFL quarterback. In fact his dad had taken him up to Berkeley for a couple of Cal games when Rodgers was there. Pike was maybe six years old, but remembered them clearly.

"I'll check it out, if you say so," he said. "But cut to the main reason you're here."

"Fair enough . . . I got one reply to my APB. But it's a doozy. A gentleman, retired actually in Bermuda now, he insists there was an incident over Hillsdale in 1956."

"You're saying he *saw* something there?"

"Not with his own eyes, no. But his daddy was a state trooper. New Mexico State police . . . Years later, he let his son in on it. That one night at dusk he's patrolling down there, one of the old two-lanes, barely any cars, when he sees this circular craft . . . Hanging there . . . Low. But shaking a little . . . Maybe a mile away . . . Which he places as right smack on top of the damn town. Hillsdale."

Pike let it sink in. One more thing to have to process.

"Son, we got our smoking gun," Mitch said.

"Hold on a second," Pike said. "This guy's probably making the whole thing up. Having fun, jerking you around. What's stopping him?"

"What's stopping him," Mitch said, "is I didn't mention anything about Hillsdale in my APB."

"You didn't?"

"No . . . that's the information I was zeroed in on obviously, but my APB simply asked for knowledge of other UFO incidents in New Mexico around the time of Roswell."

"Oh," Pike said.

"And I said I got one response. What I really meant was one *pertinent* response, a gold medal one in fact . . . I did get two others which I'll check out at some point, but I'm only concerned with the Hillsdale sighting right now, for obvious reasons."

Pike didn't address it again until they got back in the car. "I'm going to level with you . . . It's killing me to have to buy into this garbage."

"I can tell," Mitch said. "Honestly? I'd probably be reacting the same way."

Pike said, "But *if* I bought in . . . and I keep coming back to this: They messed with the silver supply? They *radiated* it, or some nonsense? Which energized *me*? And why would they do that?"

Mitch said, “It’s possible the craft was struggling, and needed to execute a discharge . . . That it didn’t *intentionally* disrupt the silver mine. Simply that the released matter ended up there.”

“Oh my God,” Pike said. “First you’re saying the thing crossed the galaxy, no problem? Except now it’s having a little mechanical issue . . . What, a spark plug’s not firing right?”

“It sounds irrational, I know,” Mitch said, “but in the literature it’s been known to happen. Planetary gravity and atmosphere can have an effect . . . Occasionally a discharge may be necessary—to right the ship, so to speak.”

Pike tried to digest this. He didn’t want to go there, but he supposed if you really believed something *did* crash at Roswell . . . then maybe getting close to the earth *did* screw something up that day. Who knows.

He said, “You didn’t answer my question. The *discharge* you keep referring to—it radiated the silver?”

“Or simply added *to* it,” Mitch said. “Since the silver itself checked out normally in the lab, if we can believe Wayne . . . It was what they *couldn’t* identify, that was the issue, and the reason you almost wasted the guy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I didn’t almost waste *anyone*.”

“Be easy to do though, son . . . You need to keep a lid on yourself. I’m sure you’ve heard it, but the expression ‘he didn’t know his own strength?’”

“Don’t worry about it,” Pike said, but he was flashing on Dani, and picturing Marcus suspended up in that wall.

“You were saying though?” Mitch said. “It’s killing you to buy into it, but . . . ?”

Pike said, “Okay this is totally crazy . . . But, yeah, if someone bought into it . . . then the time travel part, could you change stuff?”

There was a dirt pullout up ahead, that put you alongside a big walnut orchard, and Mitch took it, stopped the car, and turned off the engine.

“What would you want to change?” Mitch said, quieter, more serious now.

“It doesn’t matter . . . Could be one or two things.” Pike took a long look at Mitch. “You really think, part of my power, is maybe I can go back?”

Mitch nodded. “You may feel you’ve been *cursed*. But part of me believes the opposite, that you’ve been *blessed* with supernatural powers . . . Time travel could indeed be a logical extension of that.”

“Why . . . because of the gobbledegook that Reggie Riley spit out about his brother doing it?”

“Partly that, yes. But even more, we UFO fanatics believe time travel is an inherent part of the extraterrestrial experience . . . It allows them to traverse vast distances--and quite likely multiple dimensions--that earthly physics deems impossible . . . Rather than travel via conventional propulsion *across* space, the thought is they bend it. Fold it up. Same with time.”

Pike resisted another *Oh my God* even though he wanted to blurt one out. He said, “So bottom line . . . you’re saying there’s more chance I could *travel*, than there is for the average Joe?”

“I would say so, yes . . . I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve been empowered in that capacity . . . I’d put the odds at 50 percent at least.” Mitch winked at him.

“Gee, thanks for such a such major vote of confidence. As I actually toy with the idea of trying it.”

Mitch said, “Something tells me you’re not joking around.”

“Why not?” Pike said. “I still don’t think I believe any of it, no matter who claims they saw what . . . And now you’re telling me 60 years ago someplace? . . . But what’s the worst that could happen?”

Chapter 42

Mitch dropped him at home and took off back to Manhattan Beach, and then right away Pike started thinking, *WHAT'S THE WORST THAT COULD HAPPEN?* could mean a few different things.

I may get stuck somewhere and that's it, I can't get back.

I may think I can change something, but it could backfire on me, and everyone might end up worse off, myself included.

I may die trying this.

The other possibility of course, the likely one, is he wouldn't be successful in going anywhere.

Which, when it came down to it at this point, *wouldn't be great either.*

How did Mitch say it worked again? Wormholes and space portals and such . . . But there could also be a mind-over-matter element to it? . . . In theory . . . Had Mr. Gillmore given any insight into that, that he'd missed?

Monday felt like a light day at school, probably because there was no football practice to worry about. Mr. Fanning the assistant principal made an announcement at lunch, over the campus PA system, how we appreciate the incredible efforts of our student athletes and so on, in contributing to Hamilton's best-ever showing in football, and let's keep the momentum alive into next season and beyond, and GO WILDCATS!

A bunch of the football guys were getting together to play a little basketball after school, have fun, blow off some steam. It was getting some juice though, becoming an event, and there were going to be people watching.

Pike could dunk the ball easily now, not just routine slams but real showtime stuff. Part of him wanted to do that, put on a little show, nothing that was beyond human, just raise a few eyebrows and have some fun.

But instead, when the bell rang Pike headed to the Beacon Municipal Library.

He'd only been in the place a few times in his life, when he'd had to write a paper where you need the old fashioned encyclopedias. He didn't know his way around, but luckily there was a friendly librarian sitting at a desk in back, who didn't look busy.

"Books on time travel please?" Pike said. "Where would I find those?"

The librarian rattled around on her keyboard. “Would you be needing time travel in literature, or metaphysics?” she said.

“Gee,” he said, “Literature, that might work, but that’d be fiction, right?”

“Yes. We have quite a few titles there that reference your topic. In metaphysics we have three.”

“So that’s non-fiction then? How someone would do it . . . with, like, instructions.”

“Yes, I believe so,” the librarian said. “Let’s have a look.” She got up and led Pike down an aisle and then turned left down another one. “Here are the first two,” she said. “The third is in our reference room.”

Pike thanked her, skimmed the first two, which were all over the place and as far as he could tell barely touched on the subject. He found the librarian again and asked her about the third one, and she took him into a special room where all the books were locked up in tall glass cases.

They had these built-in wooden ladders that you slide around, and she got up there pretty high and came down with the third book. It had a leather cover, something Pike had never seen before, and it felt old. The librarian told him he couldn’t check it out, but to please make himself comfortable in this room, and to simply leave the book on one of the tables when he was finished.

It was cozy in there, they had some overstuffed chairs where you could relax and read, and Pike pretty much had the whole room to himself.

The book was called ‘In Due Time’ by W.H. Wallabee. There was an introduction to the subject, then there was a section on methods, and then one on people’s experiences.

But what caught Pike’s eye was Chapter 6, second from the end. It was titled **The 10 Rules of Time Travel**. He read it through, and before he left the special research room of the library that day, he read it through three times more, and then pulled out a piece of binder paper and wrote them all down.

The rules were:

1. What the mind conceives, the mind can achieve.

2. Success is contingent on the traveler’s need.

3. Consider the present-day setting when preparing to back travel.

4. One travel day equals one present-day hour.

5. Travelers must maintain focus on the task at hand.

6. Travel can be facilitated by implementing time and place assistance.

7. Reverse travel is fundamentally identical.

8. Consequences of alterations should be carefully considered.

9. Any alterations should be enacted according to the laws of the universe.

10. Travelers should avoid engaging non-travelers.

It was dinner time when Pike got out of there. He grabbed a deli sandwich and didn't really want to go home, having to psychoanalyze now what was going on with his parents. Plus he was so mad at his dad.

So he drove to the mall and walked around. Hopefully he wouldn't run into anyone he knew, and it gave him a chance to think.

He wanted to tell Cathy what he was considering, since she would *get* it, but again, that would be downright rude now to involve her, since she'd moved on and seemed happy.

Then there was Dani. Would this be a good time to clue her in on all the latest from Mitch, and also on what he was considering now?

Pike decided that would be a mistake, the last part, because she might get some notion in her head and try it herself. And who knows how that could turn out. *If it turned out at all, of course.*

He did wonder how she was doing though, so he gave her a try. She answered on the second ring. "It's sweet of you to call," he said. "Everything's fine in eastern Idaho."

“Because that last time,” Pike said, “it didn’t sound all that fine.”

“Yes, well that was Richard,” she said. “He’s out of the picture at this point.”

Pike almost asked, but didn’t, what *out of the picture* meant, but Dani clarified it anyway. “I told him it wasn’t a good fit, and he walked out without saying anything, and I haven’t heard from him since.”

“Good then . . . no . . . lingering effects or anything.”

“Not a one. The best thing, I’ve found someone else, Bob. We met at the gym. We’re getting along famously.”

So far, Pike thought, but he hoped for the best.

“Let me ask you something,” he said. “You mention going to the gym. If you don’t work out, do you gain weight?”

“Gosh, that’s kind of strange question . . . But now I see where you’re going, of course . . . I don’t think so. Do you?”

“I don’t think so either,” Pike said.

He was intending to tell her about Mitch’s findings, the amalgam sources being narrowed down, the mysterious disappearance of the Texas filling, the Hillsdale silver mine and the supposed 60-year-old UFO.

But it was too much tonight, both for him to get into in detail, and probably for Dani to absorb.

Plus there was no solution, no conclusion that he could share with her, so what was the point, really.

“Thank you for staying in touch,” Dani said. “It means a lot.”

“Well . . . stay safe,” he said.

“And you as well,” she said.

Chapter 43

The week continued uneventfully, except in Pike's head, where a whole lot of possibilities were being mulled over. Thursday evening he called Mitch.

"What I'm working on now," Mitch said, "is finding someone from back in the day out there to collaborate our story."

"Wait a second," Pike said, "I thought you said you *believed* it, that you had the smoking gun."

"I do believe it. There must have been other witnesses though. I want more details . . . The problem we have, Hillsdale became a ghost town quick, once they closed the mine."

"So how do you find anyone then?"

"I don't know exactly. Maybe old tax records. Work it from there . . . I have to go out there though, most likely."

"Okay. On the travel part, I'm going to try it Saturday."

"Whoa, hold your horses now," Mitch said. "What'd you just say?"

"That I'm going to give it a go . . . What's the problem?" Pike wasn't at all sure he was going to go through with it. He was testing Mitch.

Mitch said, "Well not a *problem* . . . so much . . . as . . . I don't know, are you *prepared*?"

"What do you mean? You already convinced me I've been empowered, that I can achieve this . . . I've been doing some soul-searching . . . and I think I can."

There was about 30 seconds of silence on the other end of the line.

"Well where would this be taking place? . . . Do you need help?"

"I think I got it," Pike said. "But I found these 10 rules, I'd like to run them by you."

"Read 'em again," Mitch said, after he'd listened carefully. Pike did.

"Okay the main thing I'm picking up from this?" Mitch said. "Actually two things . . . but the first one, you want to acutely visualize the time and place . . . So you don't end up somewhere way the hell off target."

"What was the second thing," Pike said

“It was the one about, **Consider the present day setting when preparing to back travel** . . . To me, that means start from the appropriate place. In this case, I would begin your transcension in a structure that pre-dates 1956.”

“Now how in the world do you make that leap?” Pike said. “There’s nothing in there about that . . . And that makes no sense at all.”

“Do it anyway,” Mitch said. There was a conviction in his voice.

“We’ll see,” Pike said. “My main thing I wanted to run by you . . . in case this backfires somehow and I can’t get back home . . . which is pretty ridiculous to even talk about, because I seriously doubt I’ll be going anywhere to start with.”

“Keep going.”

“Well I was going to try to go back . . . just one day.”

“Ah, I see . . . So Heaven forbid there’s an issue, you simply live out the one day and you’re back where you started.”

“Kind of like, no harm no foul.”

“That could work.”

“*Could?*”

“Should,” Mitch said. “I wouldn’t try to interact with your self though. If you happen to run into yourself back there.”

“Ah Jeez . . . that wasn’t in the rules.”

“I think it sort of is,” Mitch said.

Pike took a moment.

He said, “I know I give you a hard time. But I appreciate everything you’ve been doing for me . . . I’ll call you Sunday.”

Pike hung up before Mitch had a chance to respond.

Chapter 44

It was a weird feeling heading over to school on Saturday afternoon.

If they'd somehow beaten Ramsey Tech last weekend, today would be the sectional championship game, also down in Fresno. Once they lost, Pike hadn't even been interested enough to find out who Ramsey Tech's opponent would be.

This afternoon there were two people playing tennis, one dad playing catch with his kid on the baseball field, and a couple of dog walkers on the track. Pretty quiet.

The gym was open but it was dark and there was nothing going on. Maybe they had kids' basketball practice or indoor soccer or something else earlier, but that was all finished.

You walked through the gym, then you had the regular student locker rooms, and then the football locker room, all by itself at the end of the hall, where the door opened out to the practice field. Just before you got to the football locker room there was a custodian's closet.

Pike decided a couple days ago that that would work. It was private, he could focus, and he felt safe being at school, on familiar turf.

Plus Hamilton was built in 1954, he had checked, so that met Mitch's crazy criteria too.

He hadn't thought about the closet being locked up, but he tried it and luckily it was open. There was a pretty good dose of a detergent smell in there, or bleach or whatever, but that didn't bother Pike. The only concern now was Julio, the custodian . . . Was he around today, with the gym being open?.

Pike decided he probably wasn't and went into the closet and closed the door. *At some point we have to take our chances.*

He sat on the ground and folded his legs. He covered his face with his hands and thought back to yesterday after school, when he'd purposely sat in the football stands for an hour, trying to clear his mind of all clutter, trying to set the stage for today, to give himself a target.

Now on the cement floor he focused on the metal stadium benches, the empty field, the crispness of mid-November in the air, the smell of the grass . . . The sounds of trucks passing by on the outskirts of town . . . A train whistle in the distance.

His breathing slowed. There was a stillness, a peace here.

The problem was, it was all good, but Pike didn't feel like he was going anywhere . . .

Except that now he was feeling slightly funky. There was a bit of a spinning. It was different. Not like the spinning when you overdo it on a playset when you're a little kid, and not like when you fall off something and hit your head . . . The spinning became a sudden shaking, but just for a moment, and then everything was smooth, and something told Pike to open his eyes.

He was in the stadium, on the bench, by himself. But when he looked down at the field, it wasn't Hamilton High School. It was Maverik Stadium at Western Utah.

He was back in Logan.

SON . . . OF . . . A . . . BITCH.

The strange thing, once he got his bearings, was he wasn't alarmed, or particularly scared. The stadium clock said 4:42, which seemed about right, when you adjusted an hour for the time zone. No date up there on the scoreboard though.

Pike walked out of the stadium onto the campus and headed toward the main quad. There were students here and there, not a whole lot, which seemed reasonable since classes would have ended by now. It also could have been a weekend, you couldn't tell.

At least thank God everyone looked normal, *current*, not like he was back in 1968 or something. Hopefully.

It seemed a strange question to put out there, to stop someone and ask what day it was.

But Pike needed to know, and he wasn't thrilled with walking all over campus looking for the answer.

A guy and a girl came toward him, holding hands, pretty deep in serious conversation.

Pike held up his hand. "Excuse me," he said. "Would you have today's date please?" Asking for the date, and not the day seemed more reasonable, less likely someone would think he was mentally ill.

"Sure," the guy said. "It's the 18th."

Now Pike realized that didn't help. *The 18th of what?*

"Of . . . November?" he said. He had to ask, he couldn't be worried if they think he's nuts.

"Uh, yeah, you got it," the guy said.

Pike wanted to confirm with the guy what year it was, but that was going a little too far. *Or maybe not.*

“2016?” he said timidly.

The guy and his girlfriend both nodded, but kept moving now. They didn’t seem interested in any further questions from Pike.

Let’s see, Pike was thinking. Today . . . at least MY today, is Saturday the 19th . . . So I butchered the location, but BINGO, that means I got the day right!

This would take practice, clearly. The main thing now . . . pleasant as it was out here . . . *Could he execute Part Two?* . . . Otherwise he’d have a serious transportation issue to deal with, and only couple of bucks in his pocket.

The campus had a mix of old and new buildings. No point taking a chance on something being too modern, so he picked one that was definitely old enough, red brick, with decorative columns in the front and ivy growing up the side.

There were some display cases in the lobby, and it looked like maybe an anthropology building. There were classrooms and professors’ offices, and then a main auditorium. Pike went in there. The lights were on but it was empty and there was no sign of activity.

There was a small staircase that put you up on stage, and then there were curtains to either side, where actors, or professors or whoever, would enter.

Pike picked the left curtain, went behind it, sat cross-legged on the floor, and repeated the whole shebang, in reverse. He zoned in on Beacon, the high school, the football stands, late Saturday afternoon.

His breathing slowed and the spinning began again, familiar this time, comforting . . . and then the rattling, the moment of slightly violent shaking . . . and finally he looked around, and he was on the sidewalk in front of Audrey’s house.

He hadn’t intended to think about her, in that little alcove offstage behind the curtain, in fact he made a conscious effort not to, but he obviously had.

There was a newspaper slot next to Audrey’s mailbox, and there was a paper in there which hadn’t been picked up yet. Pike took it out and unfolded it and checked the date. It was today, Saturday the 19th.

Audrey lived a couple miles from school, and Pike supposed he should go back there and get his car. He figured it would be a nice walk, and what was the rush?

So he took it slow, and drank it all in.

There were possibilities. Time would tell if he could pull them off.

For now, he was home.

THE END

Pike Gillette returns in:

[Book 2: Time Lapse](#)

[Book 3: Time Games](#)

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