

Time Games

by REX BOLT



**Pike Gillette
Time Travel Book 3**

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Chapter 1

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Beacon, California

The block was full of two-story wooden row houses, and you got the sense that most of them were apartments, one upstairs one down. Pike assumed Jack Hannamaker's Bronco was parked in front of where he was having trouble, except there was commotion coming from the house next door, the lower unit, in the back.

You had banging and yelling, as Jack had described. A little *worse* element maybe though, as there was this unpleasant-looking dude with no shirt on alongside the house yelling up into it through a ground-floor window. Combined with another more muffled voice that was coming from inside, that meant two guys who were apparently, for some reason, currently disturbed by Hannamaker.

As Pike got closer, he could pick up a female voice as well, slightly hysterical, asking the angry guy inside to please stop.

The one voice he couldn't hear was Jack's.

Pike tried to process just what the heck was happening here. You couldn't tell, it all seemed too bizarre, but either way it was more complicated than he would have thought, and Jack wasn't exaggerating.

Pike called Jack's number, let it ring until it went to voice mail, which wasn't entirely surprising if Jack was preoccupied. So, keeping his eye pretty carefully now on the guy outside the house, Pike yelled out, "Yo - Hannamaker!"

The inside voices stopped and the outside guy turned to Pike and gave him his full attention.

"Can I help you with something?" the outside guy said, and he flashed a wicked smile that was missing an upper incisor.

Pike tensed up, fearing a confrontation. If you answered a guy like this you were damned if you do, damned if you didn't, so Pike figured what was the point, he might as well ignore the idiot.

The guy was moving slowly toward him now, still with that smile, but where was Hannamaker?

"Jack!" Pike tried again, and this time there was a response, which sounded far away but maybe wasn't if Jack's mouth was involved with him holding back some door.

"PK! It's me! Right here!" Jack sounded desperate. And right *where*, exactly?

Pike walked past the guy coming toward him, which seemed to amuse the dude, and he reached up and tapped on the window the guy had been eyeballing. "Here?" Pike said.

"Yeah, man!" Jack said, his voice clearer.

Right about then was when the guy clocked Pike on the back of the head, with something more substantial than his fist.

Pike went halfway down and was able to catch himself in a kind of squat position before he hit the ground, and then he straightened back up and looked around. The guy's smile was gone, replaced by a slightly disbelieving look. He had some kind of metal rod in his right hand.

"What, you pulled that out of your shirt or something?" Pike said.

"My trousers," the guy said, almost absentmindedly now.

"You gonna try it again, is that your deal?"

The guy didn't answer. He looked increasingly concerned that hitting someone upside the head with his metal rod hadn't done much.

So Pike said, "If you're *not* going to try it again, then be a good sport and open the window for my friend, and we'll be on our way."

"Open the window *how*?" the guy said, his eyes big. "That's what I was doing before you showed up, trying to get *him* to open it."

"Oh," Pike said. "So you could smack him with your handy piece of steel?"

"That was the idea, yeah."

"Why? What's the problem, where you need to get violent?"

"Why'nt you ask your ol' buddy in there," the guy said.

"I will," Pike said. "First you need to open the window and let him out."

"Asshole," the guy said, "I already told you--"

And Pike bearhugged the guy and flipped him end to end, head down, feet up . . . and using the feet-end first, he pile-drove him up and through the window, the glass shattering and the guy disappearing into the apartment with a pretty substantial thud.

A moment later there was Jack, diving *out* the window, and right behind him was the *first* guy from inside, who Jack had apparently been holding the door *against*.

The three of them were standing alongside the house now and there was a female's face looking out the broken window, and then with her the dude appeared who Pike had thrown through it, though he didn't look too good.

The new outside guy seemed to be sizing up what just happened, and he waited for the window guy to say something, and after a minute the window guy said, "Lou, let it go." There wasn't a whole lot to his voice.

That was good enough for Pike, and he started walking down to the street, and Hannamaker was right with him, though he walked backwards the whole way, keeping an eye on Lou.

"I don't suppose you're hungry," Pike said, as Jack got into the Bronco.

"You're messing with me, right?" Jack said. "I mean is the Pope Catholic?"

"What do you say stuff like that for?" Pike said. "It's not funny, and I don't really get it, how it applies right now."

"That's 'cause I'm smarter than you. More up-top."

"Yeah, you really demonstrated that," Pike said. He saw that Lou had gone back inside. "Why didn't you call the police, like a *dumb* person would do?"

"I don't know."

Pike digested it for a second. "In-n-Out?" he said.

"I'll see you there," Jack said.

Chapter 2

It was after 11 by the time they got there, and the place was hopping and it took a while to get their food.

“What I hate,” Hannamaker said, “is your number is like 106, but then you hear ‘em say ‘Guest Number 108’ and even ‘110’, and you keep wanting to stand up, but it’s a false alarm and you’re still sitting here starving.”

“That’s ‘cause you get the Animal Fries,” Pike said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Don’t do that, it screws ‘em up back there. Keep it standard.”

“Well don’t forget it’s Saturday night,” Jack said.

“Thanks for reminding me. I left Jocelyn stranded at the mall.”

“You mean shopping?”

“The movies . . . I had to hightail it out of there when you called all hysterical, like the world was coming to an end . . . I gave her 20 bucks for an Uber in case she couldn’t get a ride home. How ridiculous is that? . . . Don’t put me *through* something like that again.”

Jack said, “I like that complex they got there, the way they re-did it. Now you have, what, like a dozen of ‘em to choose from?”

“Something like that,” Pike said. “Okay that’s enough, you running your mouth, dancing around this shit . . . What the hell was going on there?”

“I made a mistake,” Jack said. “And listen, you coming by and all--”

“Forget that.”

“She get home okay, by the way? Jocelyn?”

“See?” Pike said. “You keep changing the subject.”

“I just wanted to make sure, if you took your truck and all, and she’s sitting there with her popcorn.”

“Yeah she did . . . But before we get to *your* thing actually . . . how’s my relationship with her? In your opinion?”

“Fine. Why?”

“Nah, I was just wondering how things look . . . you know . . . from the outside.”

It wasn't something you were going to explain to Jack, or even *could* explain to him if you wanted. The fact was, he'd known Jocelyn for less than 48 hours, even though they'd apparently been going out for a month. He'd gotten back from the Chico time-travel business Thursday afternoon, returned her texts Friday morning, and then met up with her at lunch in the quad. He had to go on Facebook before that to find out what she even looked like.

Jocelyn smiled a lot and seemed nice enough and Pike figured the smoothest way to go was play along. There were the usual awkward moments, like you'd expect, where he'd ask her a basic question and then she'd stare at him weird, narrowing her eyes a bit, like how could he not know *that*?

But it wasn't the worst thing to have a date on a Saturday night, which admittedly hadn't happened a whole lot since he started traveling and threw everything haywire.

"Of course," Jack was saying, "*you're* the only one who would know if she's floating your boat." Giving him an obnoxious wink.

And it was strange to hear Jack use that expression, since that's what Pike had told him about Cathy in the last reality, that her boyfriend may not be floating *her* boat, and then *son of a bitch*, Jack acts on it right away and starts dating Cathy.

Even stranger now was the concept that Cathy was with Foxe, of all people. And Jack was with Alicia, who Pike dated once upon a time, on the rebound after Cathy dumped him because she couldn't handle knowing his secret, which like an idiot he told her. Not the time travel stuff, but the super-strength part.

Speaking of Alicia . . . "Nothing doing tonight for you?" Pike said. "Other than Lou and the other dude?"

"Yeah, well that was my fault," Jack said.

Pike wondered for a second if his travel had set something in motion there too, by *altering* Hannamaker somehow . . . But he got rid of that thought, deciding enough was enough, stop overthinking it, that Jeez, you're not people's nurse maid.

"Yeah?" Pike said. "Your fault how?"

"Okay man . . . don't think bad of me, all right? . . . There's this chick, goes to the JC . . . I was messin' around with her."

Jack didn't want to rehash the experience and was hoping that was all he needed to say. Pike wasn't going to let him off the hook so easy.

"Well what's her name?" he said.

"Tammy."

“So where’d you meet *her*?”

“In town. At the ice cream place.” Another coincidence, since that’s where Pike met Jack, not for the first time, but when they actually became friendly, which led to the construction of The Box.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep . . . So . . . you want to go to the karting place? Stillman works there, so we’re in free.” And of course another small wrinkle, since it was Marty Clarke who worked there and let them in free in the pre-Chico world. Both Stillman and Clarke from the football team that Pike and Hannamaker played on, the season wrapping up last month.

“Not so fast,” Pike said. “So you go back to her place . . . except then Lou and the other guy show up.”

“Something like that . . . The other guy’s her boyfriend. Lou, I don’t know his story.”

“You went there knowing that might happen?”

“I figured it was a possibility, but I didn’t expect it. I mean would you be worrying about it?”

Pike knew what he was getting at, how your emotions could dominate your brain in certain situations.

“Well what about the cops?” he said. “What was up with not calling *them*?”

“Nah. This Tammy person, she tells the boyfriend when he shows up, that I was helping her write a paper but then I tried to put the moves on her. That’s when I scrambled into that back room and tried to lock the door.”

“That’s not bad actually,” Pike said. “Quick thinking.”

“Thanks.”

“Not *you* with the quick thinking, I mean *her*.”

“Anyway . . . so from that angle, I wasn’t real excited about getting the police involved . . . What do you say we get out of here?”

“And Alicia . . . that mean you’re screwing around on her now?”

“Come on man, what do you think I *am*? Her and I, we’ve cooled the jets.”

“Wow . . . just since Thursday?” That was when Jack dropped Pike off on Audrey’s corner after he got back from Chico. Jack had been in a hurry, on his way to Alicia’s.”

“Things happen,” Jack said. “You got a problem with that?”

Pike said, “A JC girl like that--is she, I don’t know, *different* at all?”

Hannamaker laughed. He seemed more relaxed now that he'd come clean about tonight's incident. "You mean compared to the limited options we got at Hamilton?"

Pike hadn't thought of it that way, he was thinking simply that she was a couple years older and how did *that* work out, but maybe Jack had a point.

"I'm kidding," Jack said. "You're taking me too serious."

Pike said, "Jumping around for a second. *Sort* of on that subject but not exactly . . . You ever know any Milburns? . . . Two sisters? . . . One would be our age."

"No," Jack said. "Why?"

"No reason. Just double-checking."

Pike had been trying hard to push Audrey out of his mind these last couple days, but he couldn't help asking, just in case.

Chapter 3

Pike slept until almost noon on Sunday, the best rest he'd had in a while.

Taking a jog wasn't something he usually did voluntarily, though he'd been doing plenty of it *involuntarily* lately, but it sounded kind of appealing to go for one now.

It was crisp and clear out, the 11th of December, probably in the low 40's which was about as cold as your daytimes got in the central valley of California. Pike hung a left out of the driveway and headed the opposite direction from downtown and out to Old Orchard Park, which was one of the original landmarks in Beacon before they'd jammed it up with tract housing and too many stoplights.

The park was a couple miles away and he took it easy, which gave him a chance to think.

Where did everything stand?

You had Mitch down in New Mexico--check that, Arizona now, since he said he was paying a visit to that Lucy woman who claimed to be connected to a 1956 UFO sighting . . . Whatever.

Thinking about Mitch though, there was that issue Pike had told him about, Dani's online friend whose husband may have had Pike's and Dani's powers, but who died and donated his organs. Mitch said it was something to keep an eye on, and it didn't sit well with Pike either.

Then you had Dani herself, who Pike had avoided getting back to these last couple days. She'd texted him when he was away in Chico, which couldn't be real good, since the last time he spoke to her she was highly concerned about the police in Palm Springs. He'd have to contact her today and find out what was up.

There was Henry, who gave him the ride after Pike had experimented and traveled back one day and accidentally ended up at Bellmeade High School in Uffington, an hour away. The problem was not Henry, but his brother, who'd been paralyzed years ago in a football game and was losing motivation to live, it sounded like.

He had his own dad of course, who Pike had made a point of not talking to much, since Audrey'd revealed from her mom's diary that her mom and his dad had had an affair. How far

back in the past, and whether or not it was all over by the time Audrey's mom got run down was unclear.

But Audrey's revelation confirmed an uneasy feeling Pike had about his parents' relationship. The question now would be, with Mrs. Milburn seemingly out of the picture and therefore never having been a romantic option for his dad--how was his dad behaving? And how had he *been* behaving all these years?

It was something Pike didn't feel like addressing. His guess was his dad was screwing around elsewhere, either now or in the past or both. You didn't just change, did you? At least your inner nature didn't, Pike was pretty convinced. Mrs. Milburn herself, the 20-year-old version, kind of proved that in Chico, didn't she?

Pike got to the park. There were families out, and a few picnics going on, some soccer, a men's softball game with a barbeque fired up on the sidelines. Past all that was an old field with a cement track around it and a wooden grandstand, where, according to the sign they used to play polo with horses back in the day. It was peaceful there, just a few walkers and bicyclists on the track, and Pike took a seat halfway up the grandstand in the sun.

It seemed okay right now to let himself wonder about Audrey . . . *Where did they go?* Her dad's trucking company left Chico and moved to Iowa, that was a fact, and Pike even let it slip to Mr. Milburn back then that that was going to happen. Maybe they moved there with the company, there was some logic to that, and Audrey and her sister Hailey were born out there and had grown up with midwestern accents. Though Pike wasn't sure they even had accents in Iowa.

But speaking to Mr. Milburn back then when he was young, and even once when he was an old guy, Pike didn't get the impression he loved his job, not the way you usually needed to if you were going to make a career out of it. Somehow he doubted the Milburns had followed that trucking company to Iowa.

So where else? Heck . . . could they still be *in Chico*, for gosh sakes?

That was an obvious possibility he'd never thought of. But of course if he was remembering it right, the way it played out up there as he tried to scare both of them, his strong recommendation had been a) above all, stay out of Beacon and the central valley period and b) aim toward moving out of state.

So something told Pike they weren't in Chico anymore either.

Bottom line, the whole thing should be easy enough to track down on the internet . . . Which was good and bad. Good that he could make sure they were all okay, especially Mrs. Milburn. Bad that knowing anything about the new Audrey could open a major can of worms.

And that part felt unnatural, like you were violating some unwritten rule. Not that different, Pike was thinking, from an adopted child growing up and tracking down a birth parent who didn't *want* to be tracked down, and maybe messing up a whole bunch of people's lives as a result.

So you had to leave it alone. *Didn't you?*

Pike knew you did, but that didn't help him miss Audrey any less right now.

A dad showed up on the field with his kid and they started throwing the football around. You could see the dad was pretty athletic the way he moved and handled the ball. He was making it fun for the kid, who was about 10.

Pike watched them for a few minutes and decided what the hay, and he climbed down out of the stands and went out there and asked the dad if he could see the ball. The dad was happy to throw it to him, and Pike started warming up with the guy, tossing it back and forth, getting loose.

It had been a while since he'd touched a football and it felt good. They spread out and Pike started cutting it loose and the guy was having trouble hanging onto some of the passes, but he was a good sport and kept apologizing and was trying hard.

Pike asked him if wanted to run some routes and the guy said sure, and Pike started working him with 6-yard, then 10-yard, then 15-yard out patterns. They finished it off with a couple of deep posts and flags, and the dad did okay actually, considering the ball was really flying at him.

"Wow . . . do you *play?*" the dad said, when they wrapped it up. He was sweating profusely, which the little kid seemed to be getting a kick out of.

"Hamilton, yeah," Pike said. "Though we got beat in the second round of the playoffs. So it ended kinda bittersweet there."

"So you're a senior . . . or junior . . . what?" the guy said.

"Senior. Meaning that's probably *it* for me . . . That's why this was a lot of fun just now, to be honest."

"I don't get you."

"Only that it's nice doing stuff sometimes that doesn't have to lead to anything else."

“Got it now,” the dad said. “But . . . you have a talent, that’s obvious, you should think about nurturing it if possible.”

“Well I appreciate that,” Pike said. “Do you mind if I ask you something?” This guy seemed reasonable, and like the kind of person who would do you a favor and give your question some thought.

“Not at all . . . fire away.”

“Okay this is going to sound out of left field, I think,” Pike said. “But if you were going to *stop* a guy from playing high school football . . . how would you do that?”

“You mean like Bradley here for instance?” the dad said, affectionately rubbing his son’s head.

“Fine,” Pike said.

“It’s interesting that you pose that question actually, because it’s something my wife and I consider frequently. Her older boy Jasper--this is a second marriage--he found his way in music and theater and it worked out well for him, he’s finishing at Cornell.”

“Ivy League, that’s impressive,” Pike said. He remembered Audrey, before the accident, having her heart set on going back east to college . . . and he got lost in that thought for a moment, hoping it might work out for her now.

“Though they’re all different,” the guy was saying. “With Brad, who does love sports, maybe it’s the media overblowing it--and who *am I* to say, since it’s obviously worked out fine for *you*--but we’re concerned about the concussion issue.”

“So you’ll, what . . . channel him into something else?”

“Try to, yes. Lacrosse, for one, is not a bad alternative. It provides them the rough-and-tumble aspect they like, but hopefully without much of the head-injury factor.”

“Wait,” Pike said, “there’s no lacrosse team at Hamilton . . . or any other schools around here, as far as I know.”

“Yeah we’re from Modesto though,” the dad said. “Our league has it, and it’s picking up steam with the younger age-groups as well.”

“Ah,” Pike said. “What are you doing in Beacon today then?” Meanwhile he was pretty darn sure there was no lacrosse option in San Francisco back in the day for Henry’s poor brother.

“My wife has family here. Her sister, there’s a birthday thing. Brad and I broke away for a little while, to get some exercise.” He smiled and tossed the ball underhand to the kid.

“You got a lot of it,” Brad chimed in.

“So bottom line,” Pike said, “cut ‘em off early I guess, so they don’t spring football on you at the last minute.”

“Exactly. If you can immerse them in another sport, even tennis or golf, the hope is they take enough pride in it that their interest in football wanes.”

“How about *bribing* them not to play, would that work?”

The dad laughed. “I hadn’t thought of that . . . it’s possible.”

“Well thank you,” Pike said. “I didn’t mean to take up your Sunday . . . Where’s your family *live* anyway? Your wife’s.”

“Over on Ortega,” the dad said.

Why did this not surprise Pike.

“You know the address?” he said.

“I’m sorry, I don’t . . . Let me think, the 800 block.”

“Brick house, middle of the block? Big oak tree at the bottom of the driveway, with a branch crossing over it?”

“Why, yes,” the dad said, slightly shocked. “You know them then? The Ashfords?”

“Not the family, but the house,” Pike said. “Of course you grow up in a hick town like this, everything starts looking familiar I guess.”

The dad considered this, and said, “I had a similar outlook when I was your age. I grew up in a small town too, Turlock, and I was raring to get out of there . . . Once you do, and you put a little mileage on, sometimes that place you had to get away from’s not so bad.”

Pike shook hands with the dad, and the kid too, and he watched them cross the field toward the parking lot, and he tried not to make a big deal about the business with the house on Ortega.

Chapter 4

He was starting to feel guilty about still not returning Dani's message. She hadn't said anything, it turned out, other than get back to me when you can. Still, there was an ominous feel to it all, and Pike held onto the thin hope that his imagination was running away from him.

He'd intended to call her from the grandstand at the polo field, but once he came down and got into the football thing it seemed better to get out of there, probably to just go home.

He jogged back a different route, Soda Springs Road along the river which was pleasant enough, and when he got to his house his mom and sister Jackie and little brother Bo were happy to see him but they were involved in some project in the kitchen, which was good. His dad was supposedly out playing golf.

Pike took a shower and headed down to The Box. The Box was developed to save Hannamaker's drumset, which had been causing trouble in his own house. From there The Box evolved into a kind of private, quiet space as well. Ironic that a drum room would be a quiet spot, but there you were.

Pike was happy that it fell into place, since he'd grown to like Jack as a result, which would have been very unlikely otherwise. In fact, a couple of realities ago, Pike broke Jack's jaw and it had to be extensively wired back together, but no point worrying about that anymore.

The Box also had the distinction now of doubling as a point of departure, since the Chico business had initiated from there, and it worked out. Pike hated the word portal, which Mitch liked to use. But somehow . . . some way . . . he was getting where he needed to go, and he had to accept that fact, even if he still didn't completely buy in.

Pike had read a book that Mitch recommended called 'Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain', which documented experiments from the 1960's in mental telepathy and so forth. He had a little easier time justifying what he was doing by keeping this book in mind, kind of latching on to some of the principles. Bottom line, if you put a gun to his head and asked him how he accomplished it, the simple answer would be *mind over matter*.

The more complicated answer, of course, especially according to Mitch, would be that the *amalgam filling*, which he was fortunate or unfortunate enough to have stuck in his tooth when the old one fell out in Albuquerque, contains trace metal that may have been affected by a UFO, which somehow has empowered him.

If you can believe *that*.

Anyhow . . . It occurred to Pike this was the first time back in The Box since Chico, and he climbed the outside rope and swung over the top and dropped in. He eased into one of the beanbag chairs they'd recently added, and his nose perked up. There was a distinct fragrance of perfume, and it sure seemed fresh.

Hmm . . . You had to hand it to Hannamaker, once again he didn't waste any time. The dude's fingers still had to be raw from trying to hold back the door against Old Lou last night, but today he's evidently hooked up with someone else, like nothing ever happened.

The perfume seemed slightly familiar and Pike was trying to place it, but he realized *all* perfume seemed slightly familiar. Jack was probably back with Alicia--in fact they likely never broke up, that was simply Jack running his mouth trying to defend the college girl thing . . . Or conceivably he'd moved on already, from Alicia *and* Lou's girlfriend both, and Pike figured he'd hear about it soon enough.

Either way, he had his own problems and it was time to call Dani.

She picked up.

"You answered, and on the first ring," Pike said. "Always a good thing . . . You remember last time, I was joking, how I guess I was lucky to reach you, only because you were out on bail."

"That wasn't last time," Dani said, "that was a few times ago. And it didn't go exactly like that."

"Well you get what I'm saying," Pike said.

"The thing is," she said, "I *am* out on bail."

Pike had the phone wedged between his cheek and his shoulder, and he felt his jaw go slack as his mouth drooped open.

"Jeez," he said.

"You're not surprised . . . Right? I mean we can kid around about it, but like I told you, they claim they *have* something this time . . . so my concerns came to fruition." Her tone cracked slightly on the middle syllable.

“Well . . . who bailed you out?” Pike said. It was a dumb question, not important, but it was the first thing that popped into his head.

“My ex-husband,” she said.

And the surprises just kept on coming.

“Oh,” Pike said.

“I can tell you’re chewing on that . . . I probably never brought it up because there was no need. We were high school sweethearts and got married at 18. Stupidly.”

“How long did *that* last?” It was totally irrelevant, but curiosity was getting the better of him.

“You really want to know?”

“Sure.”

“Two weeks . . . The important part being, he has money . . . and I didn’t know where else to turn.”

“He had money back then, or he made it since?” Another obnoxious question, ignoring the possible magnitude of her situation, but he asked it.

“He earned it, though his methods are a bit shady if you ask me . . . He’s one of those real estate gurus, on late-night TV infomercials . . . Tony Block, that’s his fake name.”

Pike said, “Wait a second . . . the Dee-Stress King? . . . Jeez, I know that guy, I enjoy him.”

“Unh-huh, he has quite an act,” Dani said.

“Anyway, sorry,” Pike said. “Back to your deal--so he bailed you out . . .”

“Yes. 80 thousand dollars worth.”

“Wow . . . how’s that work anyway, I always kind of wondered?”

“You go through a bail bondsman. 800 thousand becomes 80 . . . 10 percent.”

“Ah . . . so if you . . . skip bail, you forfeit the 10 percent . . . Unless the bounty hunter can track you down, like in the movies?”

“Apparently . . . there may be more to it. I won’t be skipping bail though, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Pike *hadn’t* been thinking that, but now that she brought it up, you never knew. “Where are you at the moment?” he said. “Your apartment?”

“That would be wonderful. I’m back at the Thunderbird in Palm Springs . . . The scene of the crime, so to speak.”

“For how long?”

“Pike . . . I’m not sure I’ve impressed upon you the gravity of the situation . . . They’ve charged me with 2nd-degree manslaughter . . . I’m not allowed to leave Palm Springs, it’s a condition of my release from custody.”

“Holy shit,” he said, the full scenario beginning to register now, though the 800 thousand dollars bail should have woken him up.

“It’s okay . . . really, I’m fine,” she said, not sounding like it.

“What about, you have a good lawyer, and all that . . . who specializes in your . . . area?”

“Local you mean? Yes.”

“No I mean a . . . murder expert, or whatever.”

“I hope so . . . he’s an expensive one at least . . . thanks to the ex.”

Pike couldn’t take too much more of this. There was always drama with Dani. Though this took it to the next level, obviously.

He said, “This is out of left field, I’m still with you, but . . . he seems like a pretty good man, your Tony Block dude.”

“I suppose,” she said.

“So why don’t you just remarry the guy? Once this all blows over.”

Dani actually laughed slightly, which wasn’t the worst thing. “No,” she said, “it’s complicated . . . I know you’re looking out for me, to make better choices . . . But I can’t expect you to understand, so let it go right now.”

“All’s I know,” Pike said, “there was this couple, they got married too young, same thing. There were some early bumps in the road, but they toughed them out, and boom, 25 years later they’re going strong.”

Thinking of course of Mr. and Mrs. Milburn, Rose and Preston, and *hoping* that was the case.

“No, no,” Dani said again.

“That other person you mentioned last time,” Pike said, “who the cops said might have seen something? That the key to the whole mess then?”

Dani took a moment. “To me, the person doesn’t sound like a reliable witness. Unfortunately my attorney says they might be . . . It’s an odd scenario. Some man, staying in the hotel with his wife, he came forward and says I held Chuck underwater. If you can believe *that*.”

Pike *could* of course, and *did*.

He said, "But he kept his mouth shut when it happened? I mean you went back to Pocatello and all, with no real problem, right?"

"Yes . . . Apparently the issue was the man was spying on me in the hot tub. There were these vines that climbed up on the fence, like they have down here, which offered some seclusion. He was peeking at me through them. I was laying back with my eyes closed until Chuck appeared, and wouldn't have noticed him anyway . . . The issue supposedly, what took him a while to come forward, was he was embarrassed to have to tell his wife what he was doing."

"Give me a break. That sounds like a lame story."

"I know. But regardless, he was able to provide details apparently."

Pike couldn't help it. "You were in a small bikini then, or whatever?"

"All right, that's enough," Dani said. Pike was picturing her getting out of the hot tub and bending over Chuck, giving him fake CPR.

"Well at any rate," he said. "What's next?"

"Not a whole lot. We have two weeks left in the semester, so they have a sub for my class. The next court date isn't until January. This is going to blow off my whole school year, I'm afraid."

Pike said, "So where's the guy live? . . . Who said he saw you do what you didn't do?"

"In Minnesota," she said. Adding, with a touch of suspicion in her voice: "Why?"

Pike didn't *know* why. Though he couldn't help think of some of the Mafia shows, like *The Sopranos*, where they paid the guy a visit and made sure he understood not to testify.

He had to admit, something he never would have thought, but when you got a little taste of being an enforcer, it felt kinda good . . . Unique at least.

The guy in Santa Monica that time with Mitch, the lab person . . . Wayne was his name, as Pike was remembering it now . . . What he did, first he shook hands with Wayne hard, possibly cracking a finger or two. Then when they took the walk and the guy was jerking them around about why the Texas filling just happened to disappear, and what was *in* it, he'd grabbed Wayne by the earlobe.

That was the extent of it, but by that point Wayne understood the *possibility*, that Pike might *keep* pulling and his ear could come *off*, if he didn't try to explain what happened.

Pike and Mitch went to a Chinese place on Wilshire Boulevard after that, and they didn't dwell on Wayne anymore, but that feeling of power lingered a little since then.

“No reason,” Pike said, answering Dani about why did it matter that the doofus lived in Minnesota. “I was just wondering out loud, was there a chance the guy might change his mind, and not want to come back for a trial. And you win by default, or whatever they call it.”

“I wish,” Dani said. “But he’s in too deep now.”

Pike figured that was true. And it obviously wasn’t realistic to think that he could mess with the guy, and get away with it.

At least not in current time.

Now that was another idea, an obvious one, and he was surprised he just thought of it . . . Could you go back, and maybe do something borderline illegal, and just get the heck out of there?

Or would the same law enforcement dude, a few years older but with the same chip on his shoulder, track you down the normal way anyway? Especially since you look exactly like you did 5 or 10 or whatever years ago in travel time, and you stand out like a sore thumb?

Pike tried to project out various scenarios. If you went back and strong-armed the idiot with a threat, to never, ever set foot in Palm Springs . . . and even if you got away with it, would that do the trick?

It might or might not. Probably no. The Minnesota guy might find his way there anyway, maybe just by accident, which wouldn’t be surprising, given quirky the way these alternate-reality deals had been playing out.

Even so, it could still be worth taking the chance, and confronting him in the past . . .

Except for the minor fact that Dani was still going to drown Chuck in the three feet of water in that hot tub.

Then you’d have someone *else* staying at the resort, who maybe developed a stomach ache and just happened to step outside for some air and saw something . . . or Chuck himself might have made a comeback after Dani pulled him out and was getting ready to perform fake CPR, forcing her to grab him by the throat in broad daylight to finish the job.

Not to mention . . . you had the issue of Pocatello PD sharing their suspicions with Palm Springs.

Pike said to Dani, “If I tell you to hang in there--does that help?”

“Not really,” she said. “But you’re a good kid. Thank you for checking on me.”

“Oh come on . . . *Kid.*”

“Well is that so bad? Every day simple and carefree? You should embrace it, while you can . . . You know I’m right.”

She was wrong, but forget that. What *he* knew . . . unfortunately . . . was he might actually have to go back and somehow deal with Chuck.

Hopefully not, but it was sure shaping up that way.

Chapter 5

The plan Monday was to talk to Henry after school. Pike was putting it off, didn't want to get involved in it *ever*, much less this soon after going through the Chico ordeal. But he'd told Henry at the gas station, before he'd had to bend down and crank the side of his SUV off the ground to make his point, to tell his brother to hold on.

The brother of course, according to Henry, had been paralyzed many years ago in a high school football game, as about the most unlucky kid in the world, since it happened in the first game he ever played. Henry said it was in San Francisco, that now the brother was living in Monterey, and after putting up a good fight, was losing his will pretty bad. From hearing Henry tell it when he ran into him at that gas pump, Pike had the sense the brother wasn't going to be around much longer.

That was another thing--if you waited until a guy *died*, could you then effectively do anything about it in the past, or did you have to take care of it while the guy was still hanging on?

Then it dawned dawned on Pike . . . *Oh my God. What am I talking about? Mrs. Milburn **died**, that was the whole point . . . And Chuck, who he had plans for, was currently **dead as a doornail** himself.*

That was the thing . . . There were so many complications to the travel, details and quirks were legitimately hard to keep straight, that you'd get mixed up on the most basic stuff . . . Unbelievable.

At any rate it sure seemed like forever since that little encounter with Henry, but Pike realized it was only a week ago, last Monday evening. He'd been cruising around sort of killing time, and Henry was too, while his daughter was playing a basketball game she didn't want him to watch.

Come to think of it, about an hour before that was when Hannamaker told him, guess what, he was going out with *Cathy* now. Pike had no good reason to have a problem with that, but he did anyway, though it wore off.

Meanwhile . . . he had to deal with a normal school day before anything else. One class he was taking that he shouldn't have was advanced algebra. The reason was, on the slim chance that he ended up in a decent 4-year college, most of them required it.

The teacher Mr. Hendock graded tough, and Pike was limping along in the class and had lost points a couple times for being absent when he had to travel. Plus he cut class once or twice which didn't help.

But forgetting all that, the interesting thing, in the aftermath of Chico, was you had the same teacher, the same period, 4th, the same classroom, but the seating was different . . . (also the textbook was different, but that was no big deal).

The way it worked before though, you came in and you could sit wherever you wanted, and Pike usually sat next to Amos Stillman from football. Hendock learned your names pretty quick, and could call on you no problem wherever you were sitting.

The deal now was there was a seating chart, and you had to abide by it. Pike figured teachers used seating charts when they needed help figuring out who everyone was . . . That was another thing, Mr. Hendock had glasses now, which he didn't pre-Chico, and he had to keep taking them on and off for stuff, such as reading the seating chart before he called on someone.

Pike took his new permanent seat in the second row, and at some point the girl next to him was called up to the blackboard to work out a problem. Pike hadn't noticed her before, and he tried to place her, and he couldn't, but it wasn't the way she looked so much as her mannerisms that reminded him of Audrey.

As they shuffled out of there at the end of class Pike said excuse me and asked her her name, and she said Andrea, and without thinking too hard he asked for her number, and she shrugged her shoulders and gave it to him.

Pike was alarmed but also intrigued by this, the name similarity on top of the familiar-gestures part. He ran into Amos Stillman a couple periods later and asked about Andrea, and Stillman said he'd seen her around, and that was about it. Not much reaction from Hannamaker either when he asked *him*, though Jack said he was pretty sure she'd only showed up this year.

School got out and Pike weighed touching base again with Andrea, but unfortunately he had Henry on his plate. It wasn't automatic that he could even find the guy, since he didn't have any information on him, not even his last name, but he knew Henry lived in Uffington,

and worst scenario Pike supposed he could get in touch with that kid Anthony who he'd visited in the hospital over there after he injured him in the game.

Anthony's sister was friends with one of Henry's daughters and supposedly one thing led to another and someone recognized Pike sticking his stumb out on Meade Street that day and the dad, Henry, stopped and picked him up. One minor thing Pike remembered now, Henry said his brother's name was Jeff, and they'd grown up in the Marina District of San Francisco.

This stuck in his mind only because when the Giants won their first World Series a few years back, Pike and a couple other kids went up there to try to get some autographs, and the word was some of the players lived in the Marina District. They banged on a few doors but didn't get anywhere, and the final house they tried, the guy, who definitely wasn't a player, threatened them with a pit bull.

But coming back to right now . . . did he really have to find Henry *today*?

Hmm . . . Pike took out his phone and hesitated for a second, and then texted this Andrea girl.

He gave it ten minutes and she didn't reply so he figured he'd try to find Henry after all and got in his truck and headed northbound toward Uffington. Halfway there was a hot dog stand that had been at that spot forever. The dogs weren't much but it was sort of a local landmark, the place set up like a Hawaiian thatched hut, and they had fresh lemonade for free if you got the three dog special, which Pike did, and as he wolfed it all down he noticed Andrea had returned his message.

So he called her direct. "You know, the guy from class today," he found himself saying, slightly embarrassed to be calling her, since he himself didn't exactly know why he was.

"Okay, I know you now," she said.

"So . . . what's up?" he said.

"I'm sorry?" she said. This wasn't off to the greatest start. She didn't sound suspicious exactly, but more like irritated.

"No big deal," Pike said, "I just want to ask you a couple questions . . . How would *that* be?"

"I don't know . . . *abnormal* comes to mind," she said. She didn't laugh, but it sounded like she was lightening up just a little, probably more out of curiosity than anything else.

Pike checked the time. "Good . . . so when would work?"

"Well, I have about five minutes right now, before I get picked up," she said.

Pike said, "Nah, I was thinking, you know, sit down or something . . . You like ice cream?" The ice cream theme had been popping up more regularly lately. Meanwhile he'd been listening to her carefully, in case anything she said reminded him of Audrey. He wasn't getting that vibe so far, but it was hard to tell.

"I do," Andrea said, "but I have to be careful. I dance."

"So?"

"So . . . I'm cognizant of healthy eating. Is there a problem with that?"

Gee, fancy way of saying it. "Who's picking you up?" Pike said.

She delayed a moment and then said, "My boyfriend, if you don't mind . . . Do you have an issue with that now as well, I suppose?"

"Not at all. What's his name?"

"Anthony DiVincenzo."

Unreal. That was the same Anthony kid, who Pike tackled and knocked out of the game, way back on that Friday night in September when the whole shebang started.

He said, "Wait a second . . . he goes to Bellemeade . . . correct?"

"My, you're quite nosy, aren't you?" Andrea said, though the edge was coming off and she was more friendly.

"I'm just saying . . . I think I *know* him, but he . . . didn't used to go to our school." Not entirely surprised at another possible post-Chico wrinkle. Which would also mean he probably didn't injure the guy in the game now, because Anthony would have been on *his* team.

"I have to go," she said, it sounding like Anthony himself was pulling up.

"Meet me at 7 at the ice cream place downtown," Pike said. He hadn't intended it that way, but there was an authority to how the words came out that was different than the rest of their conversation.

"And . . . if I don't?" she said.

"Then I'll be sitting there twiddling my thumbs like an idiot," he said, and she hung up.

Pike wiped the excess mustard from the three dog special off his hands and got back in his pick-up. Now what?

One way might be continue to Uffington as normal and find Henry, or at least ask around and get a bead on where he lived. That would mean if Andrea did show up at the ice cream place, which Pike gave about 25 percent odds of, *he'd* be stiffing *her* after inviting her.

Sometimes stiffing folks could work out in your favor. Mr. McMillan in History, who liked to get off-topic a lot and tell stories, told one that cracked up the class and resonated

with Pike. Before he became a teacher Mr. McMillan partnered up with another guy and tried flipping houses . . . It occurred to Pike now that Mr. McMillan could have bought a how-to course off some late night guru, *such as Dani's ex-husband*, but that was beside the point.

They had this one house fixed up and ready to go, and to save on a broker's commission they put it on Craigslist and tried to sell it themselves. They held an open house but by accident neither of them showed up, both thinking it was the other guy's turn to show the place. A few people called up real angry, that'd they'd gone to the open house but couldn't get in.

A lightbulb went on for Mr. McMillan and his partner, that the best strategy was *never* show up, since even though you'd continue to make people mad, the serious buyers would get in touch with you regardless, and they almost wanted the place *worse* now because the sellers didn't seem to care.

It was definitely an instructive little story, and Pike filed it away because you never knew, but in this case showing up at the ice cream place seemed the right thing to do, even if meant taking your lumps when she stood you up.

So forget heading over to Uffington for now and opening the can of worms with Henry's brother, and Pike turned around from the hot dog place and went back home and down to The Box to kill an hour.

Hannamaker was in there with headphones on, playing drums to music. Pike got comfortable and Jack finished off whatever he was playing to with a buzz roll and a cymbal crash and he took off the head stuff.

"Darn good," Pike said, "at least to my untrained ear. Don't stop on account of me, I'm fine with the noise level."

"Man, women," Jack said.

"Oh yeah? You already got a new variation on a theme, it seems like."

"Speak English there bro, I'm not in the mood," Jack said.

"Why don't *you* speak English? I'm mean last time I'm here, you got something with some new babe, that seemed obvious." It wasn't obvious but there was something up, and Pike was testing him.

"Now when was that?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I drop in to make a phone call, and there's this serious perfume going on."

Jack shook his head. “Had to help my old man all day yesterday,” he said. “Yard work and dump runs.”

“Oh,” Pike said. Thinking, could it have been his little *sister* in there, or something? . . . But that didn’t add up.

“So you imagining the shit, or what?” Jack said.

Pike was wondering if maybe he really was. “That’s weird,” he said.

“Who were you making your big phone call to anyway, where you needed the incredible isolation of The Box?” Jack was half-smiling, giving him the look.

“Ah, that Dani person again.” Pike felt himself going too far, but what could it hurt, another set of ears. “She’s in some trouble, it sounds like.”

Jack didn’t pick up on it like Pike sort of wanted. He said, “Well yeah? . . . I mean you could say they *all* are.”

Pike said, “I can’t a hundred percent disagree with you there . . . But getting back to yesterday, I don’t think I’m *insane* . . . Anyone else possibly have a *key* or something?”

Jack said, “Yeah, Foxe does. You gave it to him . . . what’s wrong with you?”

“I did? Heck . . . when would I have done *that*?”

“A couple, three weeks ago, when we finished constructing the thing . . . We had that little get-together. You and Jocelyn, me and Alicia, Foxe and Cathy Carlisle . . . Jeez, come on.”

“And I went out and got pizza?” Pike said.

“I did,” Jack said. More variation on the original, where it had been Cathy and Audrey coming over, awkward for various reasons including the fact that Pike and Jack had had alternating histories with both of them. In that reality, pre-Chico, Pike had gone for the pizza to let Jack have to deal with settling things down, if required.

Pike said, “Fine . . . Except why on earth would I give that son of a bitch the key to the basement?”

Jack’s face compacted and he took a hard look at Pike. “You made a big deal about it. How the guy’s been through a lot, and to please make himself comfortable any time . . . ‘Free reign’ was how you put it, I think.”

“He’s been through a lot . . . *what*?” Pike was afraid he might know part of the answer, and he realized with some alarm that he hadn’t followed up yet as to what the current story was with Foxe’s dad.

“You know,” Jack said, “the mom all screwed up. The DUI’s, losing her license, embarrassing the family.”

“Wait . . . what about the dad?”

“What *about* him?”

“Everything . . . cool . . . with him then?”

“Far as I know,” Jack said, eyeballing Pike suspiciously again.

“The mom,” Pike said, “she ever, like *hurt* anybody? . . . With the car, or some other way?”

“Almost, this last time. That was the thing. She rode up on that center divider on Highland, where they jog and bike and shit. The bike guy lands on her windshield . . . Dude honestly, if I didn’t know you better I’d say for sure you got Alzheimer’s.”

“But the guy was okay?”

“Like I said, lucky.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Aw come on . . . couple months.”

“And she lost her license, for how long?”

“Six months, what they said . . . I’ve been giving Foxxe rides when he needs ‘em. So have you, for God sakes.”

Pike took a minute to process all this. Jack started playing drums again. When he stopped Pike said, “And Cathy? Did I ever date her?”

“Not unless it was under-the-table secret,” Jack said, trying to joke about it but clearly still wondering about Pike’s mental state.

This was one good thing then. That meant Cathy wouldn’t know about his super-strength, which he never should have laid on her back then. It was a relief that she wasn’t burdened by that surreal secret anymore.

“So . . . bottom line then,” Pike said, trying to bring everything current, confusing as it was, into the here-and-now, “it was Foxxe and Cathy hanging out in The Box yesterday.”

“Pardner, your guess is as good as mine,” Jack said. “But who else is there?”

One thing Pike was learning was these days you could never close the door on a *Who else could* or *What else could* type question, but it was as good an answer as any, he supposed, and he’d have to try to get along with Foxxe now, even though it killed him to have Cathy hanging out in his basement with the guy.

Chapter 6

Pike waited until 7:15 rolled around and figured that was it on this Andrea girl, it had been a shot in the dark . . . But not to let the effort be a total waste he ordered a black and tan sundae which took the edge off slightly.

He was in the middle of it when surprisingly a text came in, that she couldn't leave her house tonight, but he was welcome to stop by.

Wow.

The hope obviously was Andrea was *not* some half-incarnation of Audrey, that the real Audrey was alive and thriving and whole, and that was the end of the line.

Pike was pretty dang sure this was the case. It would be unrealistic--*even by his new standards of reality*--for Andrea to be connected to Audrey.

But why not put any concerns to rest?

Andrea lived on Vallejo Street in the Hill Section. This was a decent sign, right off the bat, since it was across town from the Milburns' territory of Birch and Ortega. The other thing was, it was ridiculous they called it the Hill Section, since Beacon was flat as a piece of slate. If you got down on your hands and knees, maybe there was a microscopic incline on a couple of the streets, but really not even then.

There were front steps surrounded by nice terraced landscaping and before Pike could ring the bell Andrea opened the door.

"You were watching out the window?" he said.

"Sort of," she said. "Can I get you a beer or something?"

This caught him a little off guard, and he said no, so she went in the kitchen and came back with one for herself.

"You don't drink," she said. "I knew it. You're in training."

"Wait a second," Pike said. "I thought *you* were in training, with the modern dance, or whatever you do."

"I watch the junk food. Beer is healthier carbs . . . And if it isn't, I cheat sometimes." A mischievous side of her was showing itself, which Pike had to admit wasn't the worst thing.

“Interesting,” he said. “Before we go any further, I have two questions for you . . . Where are your parents, and was I good at football?”

“My question for you,” she said, “are you always this goofy?” She sat down next to him on the big plush sectional. There was a TV on with the sound off that must have been seven or eight feet wide, one of those massive jobs you see up front when you walk into *Best Buy*.

“Every once in a while I like to get some perspective, from an outsider,” he said, which was true. He’d confirmed nothing had changed with football after his first failed trip to save Mrs. Milburn, but he hadn’t confirmed it again this time.

“You were good,” she said. “You threw a lot of touchdowns.”

“Did we . . . get to the playoffs in Fresno and everything?”

“Most definitely. That’s where Anthony got hurt. You don’t remember?”

Pike said of course he did, but he *didn’t*, since this was another unexpected development.

Sometimes you didn’t need to follow this stuff up, you sort of knew the answer . . . In this case Pike would bet money that he somehow collided with Anthony in that game, even though they were teammates this time.

“Let’s move to question two,” he said. “Your folks.”

“They’re at some kind of a benefit tonight,” she said.

“What about brothers and sisters? You have those?”

“An older brother. He’s in Florida. Anything else?”

“So why couldn’t you leave the house tonight?”

“I could have, but this seemed easier.”

“Oh . . . well before I get into your parents a little more--who’d you go out with before Anthony?”

“You get right down *to* it, don’t you?” she said. “Marty . . . It was pretty obvious there, at least *I* thought.”

“Clarke?” Pike said. “Not Matt Foxe before that then?” He didn’t know why he asked it, but he had a hunch.

Andrea laughed and waved her hand like *are you crazy*.

Pike said, “Where’d you live before?”

“Before this year? Las Vegas.”

“How about before that? And your parents I mean, before you were born.”

Andrea said, “I don’t mind . . . but just so you know, I feel like I’m on trial here, frankly.”

“You’re not,” he said. “You’re just under interrogation.”

She smiled and squeezed his arm, and then she popped up and got some cheese puffs from the kitchen, so so much for watching the junk food, and when she sat back down she slid closer to him.

“To pick up on your line of questioning,” she said, “before that they were in Philadelphia. Born and raised. You hear them speak, they both have the accent. I had a bit of a Philly one myself, but lost it when we moved to Vegas.”

“Great, good to hear,” Pike said. “That they were *back there*, and not *out here*.”

Andrea shifted her position and tilted her head slightly and looked at him. “You . . . are freaking *something else*,” she said.

Pike was pretty sure he could have kissed her then, and it would have worked out.

Of course there were two small issues. Anthony, who’d probably try to kill him, especially with Pike already knocking him out of the sectional playoff game.

And Jocelyn. Not to mention his own conscience, for being a total ass.

But he said, “You know that girl Jocelyn, right? How’s my relationship with her, would you say?”

“Oh no,” Andrea said, “I’m not going there.”

“I’m still trying to get to know her, is the reason I ask,” Pike said.

“Welcome to the club,” Andrea said.

“Jocelyn, you mean?”

“No, I mean *period*,” she said, and Pike got up to leave, and she let him out, and told him this was one of the more unusual conversations she’d had in California, but she didn’t mind.

Chapter 7

Pike felt a little funny about it but on Tuesday at lunch he cornered Anthony in the quad, nothing to do with Andrea, but to see if he could get to the bottom of identifying Henry.

Anthony was a nice-enough kid--he'd been a good sport in the hospital that time too, a lot friendlier than Pike would have been under the circumstances--and he said he'd check with his sister.

What Pike liked was he pulled out his phone right then and there and texted her, none of this *no problem, I'll take care of it* bull-roar, but straight-up hands-on.

It was also fortunate that Anthony's sister and Henry's daughter still knew each other, despite Anthony's family apparently living in Beacon and not Uffington like before.

"Geraghty," Anthony said after a minute.

"Thanks man," Pike aid. "How do you spell it?"

Anthony looked at his phone and read it back. "What do you need with *that* guy?" he said.

"It's a long story. I told him I'd try to help his brother."

"Ooh, that one's a tough deal," Anthony said. "When you blindsided me, I flashed on that for a split-second."

"I blindsided you?" Pike couldn't help wondering what happened if they were on the same team, though there were plenty of situations where you just didn't see the other guy.

"Oh yeah, *dude*. It was like, please tell me I can feel my right arm . . . Then it eased up, that part, but then my head . . . I had no friggin idea where I was."

"That's my fault, then," Pike said.

"No kidding," Anthony said, but like a good trooper he was smiling, okay with it like it was part of the game.

Pike said, "So you know the story then? With Henry's brother?"

"It sobers you up," Anthony said. "Very scary . . . It was also, whadayacall . . . controversial."

"It was?"

“The story I got, his senior year, he’s defensive captain, right? They get into the championship game, but he rolls his ankle bad in the first half. They tape it, but he can’t go . . . Then late fourth quarter the replacement gets hurt--middle linebacker--and they put him back in.”

“Ah no.”

“He’s got no leverage, his form’s all screwed up, and boom, there’s a collision near the goal line . . . and you got the unthinkable.”

Anthony was right, it was hard to hear about. The scenario was different too, where last time Henry’s brother was a freshman, and it was the first football game he ever played. While this one might have been the last, even if hadn’t gotten hurt. But what difference did that make?

“What about the guy now?” Pike said.

“I have no idea. Can’t be good.”

“No, it can’t,” Pike said, and the bell rang and he thanked Anthony and went back to class.

After school on an impulse he dropped in on the librarian, Frankie.

She wasn’t at her desk so he looked around the library, didn’t see her down any of the aisles, and started checking those side rooms where she’d helped him out before.

She was coming off a ladder in the same reference room where she’d found him the original time-travel leather volume in that high glass case.

“Hey stranger,” she said, genuinely happy to see him.

He wasn’t sure if he was over-stepping it, but he gave her a hug and she was fine with it. “Well I’m back,” he said. “At least I think . . . That radio station thing, it helped.”

“I’m so glad to hear that,” Frankie said, as casually as if he’d been thanking her for helping him with a school project.

“Okay now here’s my next situation . . . if you don’t mind . . . ?”

“I *never* mind,” she said, and she disappeared for a minute and came back with two steaming cups of coffee and handed one to Pike.

“I don’t drink much of this stuff, but I’ll make an exception,” he said, and it kind of hit the spot, and pretty soon he’d gulped down the whole cup and he felt his energy level rising, though he had to slow himself down from talking too fast.

“There was this accident,” he said, “in a high school football game. I’m pretty sure in San Francisco . . . The kid would have been, let’s see, his brother is probably 40, 45 now?”

Pike realized he could have searched around himself, first, before involving Frankie, but he enjoyed having her help him.

“So you’re looking for some accounting of the incident?” she said.

“That would be great. To the best of my knowledge, the guy’s name was Jeff Geraghty.”

He spelled it for her and she wrote it down. “I’ll have a look,” she said. “Anything else?”

Pike leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. “What I admire about *you*, is you continue to handle everything business-like . . . all the crap I throw you . . . and you don’t pry.”

Frankie smiled. “I’ll take that as a compliment . . . So that’s the extent of what you need today?”

Pike felt like adding something, questioned himself, and then let it fly. “And I think there’s something mysterious with you, below the surface . . . isn’t there?”

She seemed off-balance just for an instant. “My, we’re certainly devoid of subtlety today, aren’t we,” she said.

“Yeah,” Pike said. “This travel stuff, these new realities and such . . . or whatever the *frig* they are . . . sorry . . . I’ll admit, my outlook is, I’m more up-front with people.”

“I can understand that,” Frankie said.

“You can?”

“Certainly.”

Pike was having fun with it. “But you’re not going to give me a hint. What the real story might be . . . with the perfect librarian.”

“No,” she said.

“No, there’s no *story*? . . . Or no, you’re not *going* there?”

“No.”

“Well that narrows it down . . . anyhow, yeah, my full deal here, I’m trying to find this guy, and . . . you know . . . intercept him . . . Ideally without having to talk to the brother. The brother has more details, but I think I scared him last time I spoke to him.”

“I see,” Frankie said. “So you’re trying to structure the project from the sanctity of the library.”

“You really talk like that?” Pike said.

“Only sometimes,” she said.

“See what I mean? . . . The mystery part.”

“Let’s get on the master computer,” she said, “and see what we might have in front of us.”

Chapter 8

Pike was in his room tapping a pencil on his desk, starting to wonder, did you *need* a girlfriend. Couldn't you just dabble here and there, sample the menu so to speak?

Hannamaker had actually stuck this concept in his head the last couple days. Not by saying it outright, but by his actions. Even the adventure of scrambling out of there from the JC college-girl mess was worth something, and then Jack dumps Alicia it sounded like, and he is free to play the field.

Which Pike figured he might have been doing Sunday, with that perfume rising up out of The Box when Pike got there, though that was Foxe and Cathy it turns out, so what could you do.

But still . . . He had to admit he envied Jack, all that freedom, while he himself was still feeling his way with Jocelyn. She was great, there was nothing you could point to, but it was tough barely knowing someone when it seemed like *they* knew *you* pretty darn well.

That was the other thing that concerned him: In a moment of passion maybe, did he level with her about his situation, the way he had with Cathy? . . . Probably not, but it wasn't exactly something you could *ask* her about now, and either way he didn't need any *additional* unknown shit hovering over him.

He hadn't been communicating with Jocelyn as much since he stranded her at the movies on Saturday night. That was his fault. To her credit, she was giving him some space, not pestering him, and not texting him a whole lot.

Pike was supposed to be doing a math worksheet but instead he'd just finished a video on Northern Great Lakes State in Minnesota. The reason was there'd been a football recruiting letter in the mail today when he got home from talking to Frankie, from an assistant coach out there, asking him to call the guy. Which he did.

The dude sounded a little young for the job, but he was friendly, and fired up. Not as fake-fired up as the Utah State guy had been, more down to earth. Part of the reason of course was Northern Great Lakes State was one of those obscure D-2 schools that probably needed all the players they could get.

But when Pike hung up with the guy he went ahead and checked out the video. The campus looked fine, and there was plenty of red and orange color with the leaves changing, though when they showed a clip from an actual game the students in the stands (and there weren't all that many of them) looked pretty cold.

Whatever. He could work on the math now . . . Or kill more time . . . One way, though you sort of never knew what you were going to get into when you did, was to call Mitch. Admittedly, he hadn't checked in with the guy since Chico--or for that matter, he realized, he hadn't even told him he was *going* to Chico. So what the heck.

Mitch answered right away, but he didn't sound that excited to hear from him, or else he was preoccupied.

"You okay?" Pike said.

"Yes, absolutely. I'm just dropping Lucy off. Can I get back to you shortly?"

"Up to you," Pike said, and this time he did start on his homework. It was hard to believe, they had finals next week and then Wednesday the semester was over and they were out for Christmas vacation.

Man . . . *A lot* of water under the bridge this fall.

He finished the math and opened up the book *All the President's Men*. They were studying Watergate in his civics class, and it was actually pretty interesting. It wasn't that far off from a good made-up detective story, these two guys, these reporters, piecing it together one scrap at a time. And all of it so low-tech. Landline phones and yellow pads and typewriters.

Sometimes the two guys would have to not exactly cheat, but use creative tactics to get witnesses to admit stuff, and Pike liked how smooth they were under pressure.

After a while he laid the book down and was dozing off when Mitch called back.

Pike said, "You sounded kind of formal there, I didn't recognize your voice at first."

"Well let's get right to it," Mitch said. "How's tricks?"

"*Tricks?*"

"An old expression . . . on my end, I'm still down here in Anthem."

"Is that right. How's the Lucy person?"

"She's good, we just had dinner . . . hey, something that just occurred to me--you want to come down and meet her? Over Christmas?"

Pike said, "Not to be rude about it, but on the list of a lot of things I got going . . . for better or worse . . . that would be at the bottom."

“What happened, I’m pretty sure now,” Mitch said, “the UFO discharged something over the town, specifically over the old silver mine.”

Pike let that one sink in . . . He wasn’t going to dispute this stuff anymore. On the other hand, so what if it *did*?

He knew it seemed ludicrous to dismiss something that was possibly *that monumental* . . . but the fact was, he was locked into it now, this endowment, this empowerment, whatever you wanted to call it.

And *how* it came about was frankly less important than it used to be.

But still, partly out of curiosity, and partly to let Mitch go off, Pike said, “It discharged something, *why*?”

“Don’t forget,” Mitch said, “we’re talking 60 years ago. So Lucy was four. But she said it looked like it was in trouble, there was a grinding sound. That after the discharge, the sound stopped and the craft rose up and a few seconds later she zoomed away.”

“*She* now,” Pike said. “But jumping around . . . everything okay with Melinda?”

“Certainly. Why?”

“No reason. You seem to be comfortable with Arizona though. And Lucy. No rush to get out of there.”

“Oh, you’re saying that because I invited you down? It’s not like I’m taking up permanent residence, or anything.”

It sort of sounded like he *might* be, but that really wasn’t Pike’s business, and enough with the small talk. “I straightened out--at least I think I did--that person who got run over by the car,” he said.

“My Lord,” Mitch said, much quieter. “Please tell me about it.”

Pike left out plenty of details, such as being an idiot and getting in trouble in the bar, and also having to play hardball with Mr. Milburn, but Mitch got the idea.

Pike said, “Coming back, there’re a lot of odd-ball things, little coincidences, stuff turned inside-out, or reversed from where it should be.”

“Such as?”

“Well one example, I meet a guy and his kid in the park, they’re from out of town but happen to be visiting the new people in the exact same house where the family I’m dealing with lived . . . Another would be, the asshole, the drunk driver who caused the whole problem, now he’s cool supposedly but his wife’s not . . . Anyhow, that type of thing . . . also different people paired off.”

“Of course,” Mitch said. “Interesting, but not surprising.”

“I’ve had to make some adjustments, but overall nothing too earth-shattering . . . But the main part, do you think it’ll *take*?”

“Let’s see, we’re talking 1993, so what . . . 23 years? And they were just kids basically. No offspring at all yet . . . It should.”

“Jeez, thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“I *am* confident,” Mitch said. “You went deep . . . I’m very proud of you incidentally.”

“Because there’s no sign of the family in Beacon, from everything I can tell. There is this *girl* though, new in school this time, I was worried there were some similarities . . . but now I’m not so sure.”

“Let it go,” Mitch said, his tone softer. “Pike, you’re fine.”

Pike made fun of the guy, but it was awful good to talk to Mitch, it really was.

He continued. “What’s eating at me of course, which I try to block out every day, but in the end I can’t, is I want to make sure they’re . . . alive and well. The family.”

“So try to check,” Mitch said.

“Whoa . . . you don’t think, there’d be like some nasty karma, or something?”

“Why *would* there? You’re not interfering in their lives, you’re simply confirming their whereabouts. And of course their existence.”

“Oh . . . you think?”

“I do,” Mitch said. “And do me a favor, keep in mind what I said, coming on down. Lucy is an amazing woman . . . And there’s a tremendous triple-pool and spa set-up, and you have 85 degrees and fresh desert air and red rock all around.”

It *did* sound kind of appealing when he put it that way. “This is at Lucy’s, this dream resort thing--or your little fleabag motel?”

“Lucy’s. I sneak in. You can too.”

“Well where would I stay,” Pike said.

“With me if you like. There’s an extra bed. Two queens.”

That didn’t sound good, having to share a room with the old guy. Mitch picked up on it and said, “Either way, don’t worry about that right now. But I think it’d be adventure for you, if you can make it.”

One thing Pike didn’t need were any more adventures. But yeah, okay, he’d think about it.

Chapter 9

It still went against his instincts, but Wednesday morning before school Pike sat at the kitchen table, flipped open the laptop and, slightly cautiously, started looking for the Milburns.

Mitch seemed so casual about it, like *just go for it*, what could it hurt . . . which was kind of out of character, considering he's been a stickler for certain other things, like making sure you travel from a pre-1956 departure point and all that.

As Pike thought about it overnight though, this might be different. After all, you weren't injecting yourself into their lives, you were just a guy snooping around on the internet, no different really than any other doofus who might be looking for them for whatever reason . . . Right?

He didn't have a lot of time, but in the ten minutes he gave it he didn't get anywhere. He tried **Preston Milburn** first, in one of those national white pages directories. A few matches popped up, but none of them felt right. One guy was a dentist, and no way could Pike see that, and the guy seemed too young anyway. Another one seemed too old. A couple others had Preston as the middle name, which didn't ring true.

There were a bunch of **P Milburns**, no first name spelled out, but in the little side boxes where they list possible relatives and connected individuals, none of them had a **Rose** in there, much less an **Audrey** or a **Hailey**.

Anyhow, he didn't have time to look up Mrs. Milburn, and a more complete search would have to wait, and he got in his truck and drove to school. People weren't always listed in these jumbled-up white pages thingamajigs of course, were they?

In fact Pike was thinking probably *most* people weren't . . . but then again a lot of old-fashioned folks in their 50's like the Milburns had at least one landline somewhere--he remembered they did in the house on Ortega-- and probably *were* listed more often than.

He'd find them, he was pretty sure of it, now that he'd opened the floodgates and was on a mission. If all else failed he could ask Frankie to help him, even if she had to break a rule or two again and use that administrative account to get a better search going.

Putting all that aside though, Pike had a slightly uneasy feeling this morning as he pulled up in the student parking lot and headed to first period.

With football being over for more than a month, going back to when they got hammered in the playoff game at the big stadium in Fresno, they were required to take some sort of P.E. every day to replace it, so most of the players chose weight training.

Pike had never said boo to Foxe in the weight room, but this time around, since Hannamaker had convinced him the guy was decent, Pike said something to Foxe today for the first time.

Of course the original problem, way back in the dark ages now it seemed, was Foxe started off the year at quarterback. Which is where he played in the Bellemeade game, where Pike as a skinny defensive back unexpectedly knocked a couple guys out of that game--one of them being Anthony, but of course that part didn't happen now, though maybe it *did* to a third guy, which Pike wouldn't want to know about.

In any case, the Monday after the game, with Pike pretty much freaking out after confirming his unexpected monster increase in strength, he was throwing ball around with Marty Clarke in practice and Coach noticed.

The ball had major zip on it and was going where he wanted, and Pike realized with some alarm that could probably throw it a hundred yards.

Coach took him aside and set up some drills with a couple of the players, and Pike had to intentionally stick a few bad throws in there to avoid looking *too* good.

Foxe started the next game but was only so-so, and Coach hooked him pretty quick and put in Pike, and Hamilton went on to have one its best seasons. Along the way, in the backyard of a party, was when Foxe had challenged Pike, and Pike had to let him beat him up.

There were a few more incidents, one of them where Pike stole the steering wheel off what he thought was Foxe's car, by snapping it off, when Pike was worried Foxe was going to drive drunk.

In the aftermath of his dad and Mrs. Milburn, Foxe quit the team, and Pike tried give the guy a wide berth, staying out of his way as much as possible, though the last thing he heard was Foxe was in pretty deep with drugs, and with junkies who were robbing houses.

So Pike supposed it was all good now, or at least mostly. You had the mom, Mrs. Foxe, apparently replacing the dad as the family drunk, and luckily her license was currently revoked, though Pike was a bit nervous that he'd have to keep any eye on that.

But Foxe was obviously a decent kid now, especially if Pike had handed over to the guy the key to the basement and The Box.

Still, part of Pike couldn't help wondering . . . *Am I some kind of idiot? I mean why would I do that?*

What he said to Foxe today, to break the ice, at least in this new reality, was, "Cathy ever in The Box before?"

Foxe re-racked a barbell he'd been working with, looked at Pike funny and said, "Dude, what the *hell* you talking about?"

This was interesting. Maybe the new guy wasn't so differently nice after all. This reminded Pike pretty closely of the tone the guy had invoked before he swung on him in that backyard.

He figured he could smooth it over though. He said, "My house? . . . The drum room downstairs?"

"Oh yeah, that," Foxe said. "Hey I've been meaning to thank you, you're a good man giving me access and all."

"Not a problem . . . reason I brought it up, and Cathy, was I notice you guys were hanging out there a while on Sunday."

"No we weren't," Foxe said point-blank.

"Ah . . . there was perfume and stuff, when I got there later. I assumed it was Cathy's?" This was a mistake, but too late.

"Listen pal," Foxe was saying now, edging up into Pike's face, "what would a butter-butt like you be knowing about my girlfriend's perfume?"

It got silent quick in the weight room except for a clangs at the far end.

Pike was pretty sure this was the exact same Foxe. Life hadn't dealt him as many tough blows maybe, but you apparently you didn't just iron a personality out of this guy and replace it with a better one, as simple as someone going in for knee-replacement surgery and coming out with all fresh parts.

It was the wrong time to be doing it, but in his head, he was running through other people he'd known in multiple realities.

It was hard to come to a blanket conclusion, but he suspected, like with Foxe (who was getting ready to punch him) that at the root, people didn't change much.

What Pike didn't want to have happen, out of principle, was for Foxe to beat him up again. Even though it wouldn't physically hurt him much, or at all . . . What could he say, it just didn't *look* good.

Word gets around right away and you have to deal with the fallout. It worked out okay after the backyard thing, Pike figured, because he was quarterbacking the team and playing pretty well, and that kind of made up for getting your ass kicked, since people forgot about it when you got back on the field.

But now? . . . This little prick? . . . Nah.

The other problem though, you couldn't exactly kick *his* ass either. At least not the way you wanted to, with everyone watching.

You could tone it down so you wouldn't stand out, mix it up with him, roll around on the ground maybe, and have people break it up.

But what would that accomplish?

Right now he did not like Foxe at all. And he didn't like his mother, and he didn't like his father. Enough was enough, and it wasn't complicated.

There was a large flat silver weight plate laying on the rubber floor, just to the left of where Pike was standing. He could read the lettering on it clearly, the **Barbell Standard** and the **75 lbs**.

You stuck one of these on each end of a bar, and you were working out with 150 pounds.

Pike reached down and tilted the edge of the weight plate and got a grip on it, just as Foxe drew back a balled-up fist and was about to come forward with a pretty vicious right hand.

Pike figured that's the way it worked with a guy like Foxe . . . Don't just fly off the handle for no reason, no, that's not enough . . . On top of that, look for a cheap edge and sucker-punch the guy when he's not quite looking.

Pike, with lightening quickness that surprised even *him* a little, straightened back up, and with it hoisted the 75 pound plate in front of his face like it was a rag doll.

Foxe's right hand connected with the plate at the same instant, and the dull *thwap* sound that distributed itself around the room wasn't a good one.

There were some *Oohs* and *Oh Man's*, and Foxe, even though he didn't get hit exactly, went down.

There was blood and plenty of exposed flesh, and some stuff sticking up, and the alignment of his fingers and all the little bones in his hand looked pretty dang bad.

A couple guys tried to sort of help him, though there wasn't a lot of enthusiasm. Finally Mr. Sanchez, who was running the class but had been in the hall when it happened, helped him up and they went out the door.

Marty Clarke came over and eyeballed the weight and tentatively went through the motion empty-handed, bringing the imaginary plate up to his nose, and then thinking about it.

He looked at Pike. "Are you kidding me?" he said.

"I know," Pike said. "I don't quite get it either.'

But luckily Amos Stillman started telling a story about something he saw on a reality show, some guy muscling up and performing some feat when the adrenaline kicked in, and after a few minutes other guys were telling their stories too, and pretty soon the whole thing got chalked up to the heat of the moment, *thank God*, and guys went back to their workouts.

Chapter 10

Frankie the librarian got back to him that night, an old fashioned voice-mail that was short and to the point. Pike couldn't picture her texting somehow, though he was sure she sometimes did. The phone message said simply that she'd found some information that might be helpful, and that she didn't have her usual day off this week, but she could meet him at Starbucks when the library closed tomorrow.

A thought crept in . . . that this lady was doing an awful lot for him with nothing in return, as was Mitch when it came down to it, as well as a few others too, and it was frustrating not to be able to reciprocate properly. Maybe someday.

Pike was getting ready to call Frankie back, and noticed a text had come in from Andrea.

Hmm . . . this was a little odd, he had figured they were one-and-done there after that interrogation the night before last, which ended with her remarking on how unusual the conversation had been.

The text said only: **whats up**, which Pike hated normally, wasting someone's time without saying anything, but in this case there was the curiosity factor.

He called Frankie back, and she said she didn't have a whole lot this time, but it might be sufficient to get his project launched . . . Interesting that she would use that word, *launched*. No way of knowing if she was thinking of it that way, the big picture, which made no difference of course, and they made it for 6 tomorrow at the same downtown Starbucks which helped kick off Chico.

Pike went back on the computer and resumed checking for the Milburns.

He entered **Rose** into the address searches, the same way he'd tried Preston. There wasn't much, and again what came back didn't look right.

The next step would be social media, wouldn't it? But first . . . he figured, screw it, just *google* the two of them for Gosh sakes, why didn't he think of this before?

Pike's hands were getting kind of sweaty on the keyboard, and he felt his heart racing slightly.

Google turned up plenty of them, but it was too confusing, it would take some sifting through. Bottom line, there sure as heck weren't any clear-cut matches. He tried **Preston and Rose** as one, on the chance there'd be some connected listing . . . *somewhere, something* . . . but zip. Other than an obituary of a Preston who died in the 1960's in Fort Wayne, Indiana, leaving behind a family member named Rose.

He tried the images section of google, but that was a mess, impossible to deal with right now.

Yes, there was still Facebook, he'd take a look next time, but frankly so far, now that he'd decided to dive in, Mr. and Mrs. Milburn weren't making it easy for him, were they.

Of course the *big* thing, which Pike was still having major trouble coming to grips with . . . he wasn't quite ready yet to look for Audrey. *That just wasn't going to happen right now.*

He checked the time. It was a little after nine . . . Yes, the *whats up* message from Andrea had been a little obnoxious and he'd been holding off doing anything about it, but there wasn't a whole lot else going on at the moment.

"What I'm thinking," he said when she answered, "is going for a light jog."

"*Now?*" Andrea said.

"Yeah. You know the big park over by the race track right? Old Orchard?"

"I think so . . ."

"I'm going to head over there and back. Couple miles. I'm kind of into running lately, though not too fast." There was some truth to it, which Pike wouldn't have thought. He *was* sort of enjoying it, it took his mind off things.

"So what are you suggesting," Andrea said, though she seemed reasonably amused. "I drive alongside you?"

"That'd be one option. Or just come with me. I'm leaving in 20 minutes, you want to join the fun." He gave her his address and hung up.

He'd started off, had turned the corner on Page Street and was a couple blocks into it when Andrea showed up in her car and said hello out the window. Pike stopped jogging and waited to see what she was going to do, and she parked and got out and she had on shorts and a sweatshirt and running shoes.

"I found your house, and your mom said you'd just left," she said. "Very nice person."

Pike said, "Well she is. I don't give her enough credit or attention . . . I gotta keep moving right now though. You run?"

“I do,” she said, and they started off. Pike was surprised actually, not just that she was a runner, but that here she was, spur of the moment, no big planning, no over-thinking it.

She had a steady, relaxed stride and she wasn’t particularly out of breath when they got to the park and reached the old polo field in back. Pike asked her if she wanted to turn around.

“What would be the alternative?” she said.

“I don’t know, sit in the bleachers a few minutes, shoot the bull.”

She said that’d be fine, and they parked themselves a dozen rows up.

“Your dance fitness, I guess,” Pike said. “Kind of deceptive. You actually don’t *look* like much of a runner.”

“Gee thanks.”

“I’m just saying . . . You’re not the petite little type that springs around on the balls of their feet and can go all day. You know what I’m talking about, the cross-country team? Half of ‘em look starved.”

Andrea didn’t answer for a minute. “Would you think of me any worse if I told you I used to be 60 pounds heavier?”

“Jiminy Christmas,” Pike said.

“See? That’s why I don’t tell most people.”

“No, no . . . I don’t mean it what way. I guess I’m impressed . . . Sheez.” Though he wasn’t sure about that.

“Well I spilled it out,” she said, “for better or worse . . . I must be comfortable with you.”

Pike appreciated her honesty but wasn’t real comfortable *himself* with the *subject*, the whole thing sounding like someone battling an eating disorder.

But he couldn’t resist asking, “Well what’d you weigh?”

“What? . . . Oh I’m not going to tell you that, are you kidding.”

He said, “Well what are you now? Like 125 or so?”

“Not quite . . . but that’s very nice of you.”

“Okay . . . so say 135. That’d make you 195, at your peak.” Pike couldn’t help thinking, *wow*.

“Kind of cruel of you to actually *estimate*, if you want to know the truth,” she said, but there was a hint of playfulness there, which he had to give her credit for.

“*You* brought it up,” Pike said. It was a clear night, and from up here in the bleachers it felt like you could see half of Beacon, at least.

No one said anything for a while. “If you asked me to read *you*,” Andrea said, “I’d say you’re stressing out. Like you’re running away from something.”

“Well that’s very perceptive of you,” he said.

“Seriously . . . Is everything good?”

“*Pretty* good . . . Let me run something by you though. If you were looking for someone you used to know . . . who moved away . . . and you couldn’t find them so far? What would you make of that?”

“If this your old girlfriend?” Andrea said.

“Jeez . . . okay, let’s say it is.”

“How long ago?”

“Ooh boy. Now you got me kind of pinned in, here. But say around 13 years ago.”

“I see. So you were both . . . like five?”

“Nah, there’s a little more to it. Leave it that just the parents moved away then . . . If I can’t find ‘em, which I probably will, but still, what does that mean?”

Andrea’s expression got more serious. “Pike, are you saying you’re afraid they perished?”

“Yeah, that, or . . . maybe just never got where they were going.”

“I’m not following you,” she said, “and I don’t think you really want me to.” She put her hand on his knee.

“Man . . . not sure how I feel about that,” he said.

She said, “You don’t have to feel *any* way . . . But these people, who you need so badly to find . . . were they running from something, as well?”

“In a sense, you’d have to look at it that they were, yeah.”

“So maybe they changed their name.”

Wow . . . Something like that, it hadn’t been in his line of thinking at all . . . He considered it. “Well that’s an interesting take,” he said. “I can’t see why they would, though. These particular people.”

“You never know,” she said. “A fresh start perhaps? . . . Hard to relate to what one might do, until we’re in the situation.”

Pike thought about it some more. It seemed awful radical, but . . . it was just *possible* she had a point . . . If he’d really succeeded in scaring the daylights out them back in 1993? Would they go *that* far?

“You’re saying,” he said, “they didn’t want to be found.”

“That’s *your* ball of wax,” she said. “But it wouldn’t sound unreasonable . . . would it?”

Pike let it hang. If that really *was* somehow the case, where would you start now?

And bottom line, couldn’t you just let it go, leave them alone? . . . Before he talked to Mitch and started digging around, he figured you could. And should . . . Now that he’d opened the door though, that was going to be tough. *Just let me know they’re okay, that’s not too much to ask.*

“Well it’s definitely been real,” Pike said finally. “You all set?”

“Just a few more minutes,” she said quietly. “This is nice.”

“In that case,” he said, “something *else* I’ll throw out . . . Anthony floating your boat?” He was again aware of having used the expression before.

“Oh, speaking of Anthony,” she said, “he told me what happened today. Matt getting mad at you but then hitting a metal thing.”

“Yeah, well, what can you do,” Pike said.

“Yes, he floats my boat. He’s a nice guy.”

“Good . . . because if I made a move on you now, and he found out about it . . . he wouldn’t let it go, I don’t think, and I couldn’t blame him.”

Andrea let it linger without responding.

“On a related-type deal,” Pike said. “We have this kind of . . . hang-out . . . in the basement? There’s been some mystery activity down there . . . I keep thinking I’ve got it figured out, but I don’t.”

“Uumh . . . Sounds interesting . . . I could you give you a better opinion if I saw it in person.”

Pike said, “Now that’s kind of forward of you. *Inviting* yourself . . . Also, there’s a catch, you have to make it over the wall to get in, we screwed up and forgot to build a door.”

Andrea smiled, trying to picture it. “I like challenges,” she said.

Chapter 11

Pike cornered Jocelyn in the hall on Thursday and told her owed her one and how about another movie Saturday night, and she said that sounded fine.

It felt good to break the ice again with her. She'd been standoffish toward him, and he hadn't pushed it, since the dumb incident last weekend where he had to beat it out of there and left her holding her ticket and her popcorn and not much else.

It wasn't worth trying to explain that Hannamaker had been in trouble, and especially not the *nature* of the trouble, so Pike didn't try to justify it because you couldn't win, you'd only sound stupid. There was no excuse you could come up with for leaving her there.

When he got home Jack was downstairs banging around on the drums. Pike figured let him play, don't be bothering the guy all the time just because you're both here. He grabbed a snack and sat in the kitchen for a while. The house seemed pretty dang empty, not that the five of them weren't actively living here, but *lifeless* was kind of the word, considering this was December 15th all of a sudden.

There was a token tree in the living room next to the TV, one of those little jobs you got at Rite Aid, which was fine, you didn't need a major tree to have Christmas harmony and all.

But the vibe was bad between his mom and his dad, which it had been for a while. Sure, there was no Mrs. Milburn in the picture, but his dad didn't seem fulfilled, same as before, which pissed Pike off.

He couldn't forget his dad trying to get philosophical on him that time, kind of forlornly saying one Saturday night that there wasn't much to do in this hick town. Pike took it back then like he was half-joking, but then you got the word from Audrey about her mom's diary and he started putting it together.

Just like yesterday, where when it came down *to* it, you didn't change an idiot like Matt Foxe? . . . No matter how many other dimensions you accidentally threw him into?

The same went for his dad.

Pike had nothing concrete to go on right now, no smoking gun . . . but he was pretty darn sure his dad was still making it with other women.

The family Thanksgiving had been a depressing scene, maybe not so much for his little brother and sister Bo and Jackie, luckily, but there was an unmistakable going-through-the-motions edge between his parents, and it was hard to disguise the fact that Christmas would be more of the same.

The drums stopped and Pike went down to the basement just as Hannamaker was swinging a leg over the wall of The Box and dropping down.

“Sounds better and better, man,” Pike said. “You got to get yourself in a band.”

Jack said, “You’re pretty entertaining, yourself. The little episode yesterday. Though there’s one guy who might not agree.”

“Very funny . . . one thing he did say, before he hauled off and wailed on me . . . that it wasn’t him and Cathy in The Box.”

“You believe him?”

“On *that*, I think I do . . . But where the guy’s unhinged though, I wasn’t *challenging* him, I was just amused by it.”

“And he took it personal.”

“I guess. Something about his *girlfriend’s perfume*, as he put it, that set him off . . . What do *you* got these days, by the way? You knocking on anyone’s door, so to speak?”

“Nah, I’m kind of re-grouping,” Jack said.

Pike said, “What I’m thinking, is maybe heading down to Arizona at Christmas.”

“You’re all over the place,” Jack said.

“What do you mean by *that*?”

“Nothing much, except it just feels like you *are*.”

Pike got there early, at 10 to 6, and like clockwork there was Frankie sitting at a back table with her computer open and writing something on a sheet of paper.

“Don’t give me too much credit this time,” she said. “The file’s not as extensive, perhaps, as pertained to your last request.”

“No, no,” Pike said, “Whatever you can come up with . . . truth be told, I don’t even want to *do* this.”

“What is it then, that you *intend* to do? To alter your friend’s plight?” she said.

Pike laughed. “Now that’s kind of out of character for you. More direct than you usually get.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Are you *kidding*? I’m more than glad to toss it around . . . And the answer is, I have no friggin’ idea. What would you recommend?”

“All right, as far as the confirmation goes,” Frankie said, turning her attention to the sheet of paper again, getting back to business, “I was unable to place an address for *Jeffrey Geraghty*, even through our administrative account . . . And I’m afraid a comprehensive search turned up nothing specific about the sporting event you referred to.”

“Gee, thanks for trying all that, then.”

“However . . . I was able to work my way into a few of the support group databases, for spinal cord injury victims . . . Jeff appeared to contribute to one of the groups until about 2009. He was quiet after that. But early on he wrote fairly extensively about his injury, the ramifications and his coping mechanisms.”

“Where we headed, here?” Pike couldn’t help asking.

“In the context of his descriptions, he details the game itself, and also his misgivings about participating.”

“I think I’m with you . . . so when *was* it?”

“It took place on October 28th, 1989 at Galileo High School in San Francisco. A Saturday . . . And checking here, the school is located at 1150 Francisco Street. I know exactly where that is, actually.”

Pike was thinking.

“Did I mis-speak?” Frankie said.

“No, you’ve been amazing . . . *Continue* to be amazing, I’m not kidding . . . The one hitch with what you said, a guy who seemed to know, he told me it was the *championship* game. October’d be too early for that.”

“I can’t comment there,” Frankie said.

“Either way, 80’s now then,” Pike said. “You think the . . . radio station gimmick’ll still work? Far as getting me over there?”

“Again, I can only make a recommendation,” she said. “My instinct is, based on your 1993 achievement, that it can indeed assist in your transport.”

“Oh boy, and you keep talking funny,” Pike said.

“It should be an exciting experience for you Pike. I’m envious actually, I love San Francisco. I can’t fathom experiencing it in a different era . . . I wish I could come along.”

Pike looked at her. Part of him wanted to shout out, “Lady, are you *nuts*?” But the other side of it, what she said . . . was that ever something you could *work*?

Pike was dumbfounded that he’d never even considered this before. Sitting there in the high school custodian’s closet, Julio’s, and of course now in the preferred departure chamber, The Box . . . son of a gun, could you, like *double-up*?

Lock hands or some nonsense, and end up traveling together?

“So why don’t you,” Pike said, “come along, I mean.” Throwing it out there.

“Ooh. Thank you for offering . . . Gosh, I know I must sound crazy putting it that way.”

“I could use the help.” Continuing to test her, and the truth was he could. These could be lonely pursuits.

“But a joint effort, such as you’re proposing--I don’t believe that would be in accordance with anything Julian suggested, in his highly detailed stories.”

“Julian . . . that’s your ex-husbands’s friend, right? Who claimed he traveled from under his ski house? In Vermont?”

“Yes. From beneath the family’s summer cottage, actually, in New Hampshire.”

“Okay, good then. Forget that, it won’t fly, it sounds like.” He was happy to close the door on the idea, frankly, once he’d worked it around for a minute . . . Even if it *were* possible, which he wasn’t going to rely on old Julian there, to tell him it *wasn’t* . . . you could be opening a monster can of worms by even trying it. Unleashing the unknown. There were enough surprises popping up, without you losing your mind and piling on something even more ridiculous than what you were already attempting.

“You *do* sound a bit frustrated though, as you approach this project,” she said.

Pike said, “You like ice cream?”

“Indeed I do,” Frankie said.

“So let’s *get* some. It’s walking distance. I’d recommend the black-and-tan, personally.”

Frankie was game, and she packed up her stuff and they went over there. Luckily Pike had enough on him to take care of it, even though she tried to pay.

She said, “This is delicious. One thing I surely miss, is being 18 again and able to eat whatever you like . . . Even ice cream before dinner.”

Pike said, “Last time I was here, I was waiting for someone to join me, but she said she had to lay off the junk food.”

“Well, I admire that level of discipline.”

“Either that, or she’s got some issues.”

“We all do,” Frankie said.

Chapter 12

When Pike got home he realized he'd meant to follow up with Frankie on one particular thing she'd mentioned. What it sounded like, she'd read a bunch of stuff Henry's brother Jeff wrote and posted, and one thing he said, or at least she was *interpreting* that he said . . . was he had second thoughts.

Misgivings about participating was what how she put it, if he remembered right.

What the heck did *this* mean? Misgivings about going back in the game? Which is kind of how Anthony had described it . . . That he rolled his ankle, and it was bad enough that taping it up didn't work, but then they stuck him back in at the end when the back-up guy got hurt also. Even though Jeff didn't like the idea?

Or . . . was it a larger, more complicated state of mind that the kid had? That he never had his heart in playing the sport, the game of football, period?

It was a bit late to pick up the phone and call Frankie to get this straight. Pike thought it through a little more. If it was the second thing, that might make his job easier. You maybe go back a couple years earlier, catch the kid when he's in middle school . . . a little persuasion, a little re-direction . . . and you get him to take up badminton or something.

If it was the first thing, that he might have loved football more than anything but just didn't feel like going back in that game at that particular moment, then your job was going to be rougher.

It would be great of course if you cut just cut him off, that one game. Lock him in his house . . . or apartment or whatever it was . . . that morning. Or if you couldn't do that, figure out a way not to let him *get* to the game . . . If that didn't work, steal his cleats, or his helmet, his shoulder pads. Jeez. It shouldn't be that hard . . . Whatever else, if you can only accomplish one thing, don't let him go *back* in the game at the end. *Even if you have to run halfway on the field and tackle the dude yourself.*

But then again you had to keep in mind your Mrs. Milburn situation.

Shutting her down on the spot at the heart of the matter, the walk to the corner with Mark, which seemed so damn logical . . . it didn't work.

It sure would make the job a lot simpler though.

Pike called Mitch. With him, you didn't worry what time it was, or whether you were waking him up. Who knows, by now he might have worked his way into Lucy's apartment and they might be wide awake, nursing a couple of nightcaps, getting settled in to watch Jimmy Fallon.

"Yeah," Mitch said. He *did* sound like he just woke up, but whatever.

"I want to keep it simple," Pike said, "what I'm running past you . . . Now on the other thing, you told me I had to go *deeper*. Does that apply all the time?"

"I'm not sure I'm following you . . . you mean in every situation?"

"Yeah. Guy breaks his neck, I should be able to *handle* that . . . Shouldn't I? . . . Instead of having to go all the way back like an idiot and psychoanalyze the dude? . . . Or whatever you call that? . . . All to find out why, deep down, in ten years, he's going to want to run into something, or someone, and mess himself up bad?"

Mitch said, "Well I can understand your frustration, but from what I gather, you've answered your own question."

Pike thought about Mrs. Milburn, from the first go-round to getting mowed down four days later.

"Yeah, but . . . c'mon, help me out here," he said.

"I'm not sure I'm able to," Mitch said. "Did you review your original Ten Rules of Time travel?"

"I did, before I phoned you. There's only two that really apply. **8** and **9** . . . **Consequences of alterations should be carefully considered.** And . . . **Any alterations should be enacted according to the laws of the universe.**"

"I see what you mean, they don't give you a whole lot to work with, do they?"

"That's not funny . . . The *universe* part though, what if I make up my *own* damn laws?"

"You could try," Mitch said. "It would be better, in my view, if you could pinpoint a distinct difference between this gentleman's situation, and that last one, that backfired on you."

Pike said, "You know something? This is a lot of work, whether you realize it or not . . . You don't have to throw anything on top of it, rubbing it in, that something *backfired*."

Mitch said, "I apologize, I was out of line with my lingo . . . Again, though, can you formulate a substantial distinction between the pending event and the previous one?"

“And roll with it,” Pike said, thinking about it. “That’s not the worst thing you’ve said . . . Even though I’m not sure what it means.”

“I’m not sure either,” Mitch said. “But keep it in mind.”

“Yeah, right,” Pike said.

It was after midnight when he finished with Mitch, and he had one final exam tomorrow, English.

If it weren’t for the exam, he’d forget school and go to San Francisco tomorrow, try to get this over with. It wasn’t going away, it was becoming like a thorn in his side, especially with the time he was wasting trying to analyze all the *what ifs*.

And he had promised Henry for a while now that he’d be on it . . . who at this point thought he was crazy, probably, but still . . .

And there was Jeff.

So he scheduled it for Saturday. With the one hour per one day ratio, San Francisco to Beacon, he’d be back for the movies with Jocelyn no problem. Yeah he might be a little worn out, but who couldn’t deal with *that*.

He wasn’t too worried about the English final because Mr. Kesity was a reasonably cool teacher and let them pick one book, whatever they wanted as long as it was fiction, and over 200 pages, where they basically just had to describe the book back for the exam, and explain why they did or didn’t like it.

Mr. Kesity said he’d been through enough years of kids not reading *anything* that was assigned, so he was down to this, read *something*. Pike wondered how that was going over with the principal and the rest of the English teachers, but Mr. Kesity was the kind of guy who didn’t seem like he worried about it.

Pike chose *The Amorphous Gambit* by Willard Frankenthraller. He liked the guy’s style, where he kept switching back and forth between the mind of the killer, and the mind of the detective who was trying to figure him out and track him down. They both live in New York. The killer lives in a fancy high rise apartment near 5th Avenue and the detective lives in a beat-up one in the meat-packing district. Pike especially liked how the detective, even with all the bad stuff swirling around, still makes time to enjoy good restaurants and date beautiful women, though a couple times he has to cut those activities short.

Anyway . . . he had a little time now, and some energy for it, and he decided it was as good a time as any to start looking for Audrey.

Two hours later, he closed the computer. She was nowhere to be found, nor was Hailey, and Pike laid there in the dark most of the rest of the night, praying to God that what Andrea suggested so casually in those bleachers, might be keeping the Milburns alive.

Chapter 13

The most popular song in the country in October of 1989, if he was looking it up right, was called *Ride on Time . . .* by a group called *Black Box*.

If you could believe it.

Pike thought why not choose something different.

There was *Girl I'm Going to Miss You* by *Milli Vanilli*, and also rounding out the list you had *If I Could Turn Back Time* by *Cher*, and *Right Here Waiting* by *Richard Marx*.

This was getting a little weird, before Pike came to his senses and remembered he was going to use the radio station *thingamajig*, just like he was talking to Frankie about the other night, and he wouldn't have to be selecting individual songs of the day, the DJ would do it for him.

It was Saturday morning and he was cutting it a little close, still getting organized, but it should be okay. The *real* reason he was moving slow was this was a very unappealing venture. With Mrs. Milburn, it was tough for *different* reasons, but the finish line was so clear, so unmistakable, that you just went for it. The Henry brother thing *seemed* logical, but the fact was it was major unknown territory.

He once again dialed up the California Museum of Top-40 radio, took a look at the San Francisco stations from back then, and went with his gut and selected one from the front of the dial, 620, KFCB. There was a morning DJ who had a nice voice, but there were too many commercials, so he settled on the mid-day guy, the Big Dave Burke show.

That would hopefully take care of the timing, but the location was a little trickier. San Francisco was a definite big place and he didn't know it, other than a few trips up there over the years, usually with some kid's dad driving, so he barely ever paid attention to where they were.

The idea of arriving in a stadium again was comforting. It had worked before a couple times, and even though he ended up in Orland instead of the minor league ballpark in Chico, it still got him there, so good enough.

Pike was familiar with Candlestick Park, where the Giants played back in '89, as well as the 49ers. What he didn't like about it was it felt like a remote area of the city, nothing around when a game wasn't going on, and maybe some dangerous neighborhoods you had to go through to get to the north side of town, which he was learning from the map, was where Galileo High School was, as well as the Marina District where Henry and his brother lived.

He dad had taken him to Cal football games in Berkeley, at least one a year when he was younger, and he liked it over there. He was pretty sure you could pick up a BART train then that took you under San Francisco Bay and into the city.

So sitting there in The Box, close to noon now, Pike had the computer open to a photo of Memorial Stadium in Berkeley, and he cued up radio station KFCB for Friday October 27th, 1989.

Which was hopefully the day before the Galileo football game in question.

Pike was thinking, *what else?* He had some money on him, a sweater, a bunch of change if he needed to use the pay phones they had back then, a map of SF folded up and stuck in his back pocket. Some gum, which was always good.

That should about do it, then. *Everything except actually getting there.*

He took his spot in one of the bean bag chairs, turned up the radio show, got comfortable and, no reason for it but it just happened this time, he began reciting the alphabet slowly backwards.

He'd gotten to **T** and was feeling the start of the familiar meditative state and it felt nice, and was letting himself get immersed in it.

Unexpectedly, at that point, there was some noise developing outside, voices, muffled, but the guy sounded like Hannamaker and there was a female voice too that you couldn't make out.

Pike remembered that he'd told Jack he was making a quick trip up to the Bay Area in the morning, and obviously the guy took him literally, and how could you blame him.

Since he figured he had some privacy, Jack now apparently was going to show someone the drums . . . The Box . . . hang out for a while . . . whatever else.

There were two ways to go. You could stop what you were doing and say hi . . . or you could speed it up and beat it the heck out of here by the time they dropped over that wall.

Pike decided Jack might not appreciate the first idea, being greeted out of the blue, and his friend might not either. Plus, then it would be pretty darn awkward to use The Box for

what *you* needed it for, once they were here, since you didn't routinely tell someone, *Please wait on the couch for a few minutes, I have to time travel.*

So Pike went to plan B, fast, started the backwards alphabet again, and son of a gun, the shaking started and the snare drum was rattling and the high-hat was making a sizzle sound, and boom, there was a sensation like he was being sucked into a bright blue tunnel this time, but the feeling was mostly familiar, and he felt himself slipping away just as Hannamker's voice got loud and one of his big boots braced itself against the outside wall of The Box.

Chapter 14

Pike was seriously alarmed for just a minute, because he ended up in water.

As he opened his eyes, he was slightly relieved that he smelled chlorine, and even more relieved that his feet were touching the bottom of something, and his head was out of the water.

He looked to his right, and there was a canyon and behind it green hills with areas of trees, and he looked to his left and there was the upper rim of what was coming into focus now as Memorial Stadium, the football complex at Cal Berkeley, where he wanted to be.

According to the numbers painted on the side of the pool, he was in three feet of water. It was a lap pool, there were lane lines marked by those floating plastic tubes that you see in races, and four or five people were presently swimming up and down.

In fact some guy was coming at him at a pretty good pace, a serious looking lap swimmer with goggles, fins and a cap, and Pike got to the edge and boosted himself out of the pool.

He was wet from the waist down, and his feet were sloshing around in his shoes, but he figured he'd dry out soon enough.

There was a lawn and there were a bunch people sitting around getting some sun, who looked like students, and Pike figured why not sit down for a few minutes and get your bearings.

This was part of the college apparently, a nice swim facility with two pools and also a large hot tub he noticed now that sure looked good, except it might wear him out before he even got started.

Even though they were lounging around on the middle of a Friday the students seemed focused, a lot of bulky-looking textbooks spread out on their laps. Pike realized they were probably going through finals too (if he had his timing right, which he wasn't sure of yet) and a lot stickier ones, for sure, than he was dealing with at little old Hamilton High.

Then he picked up on the fact that no one seemed to have phones or laptops, just like they hadn't at that coffee shop in Orland. And this would be (hopefully) four years earlier than

that. It was hard picturing a life where you couldn't pull out something electronic, but the students seemed happy enough, and, he supposed, still ran around and laughed and dated and partied like anyone else.

A pretty good view was opening up to the west, with the fog starting to lift and the bay and parts of the Golden Gate Bridge exposed, and Pike knew San Francisco was over that way and figured he better get a move on it.

There was a little check-in station for the pool complex, and there was a gal sitting there who looked like she doubled as a lifeguard. Pike had obviously bypassed the station on the way in. He got up and asked her the date, and she had a bit of an accent, he couldn't tell from where, but her answer was pretty clear, that it was October 20th.

God damn it.

He'd missed it by a week, if he even had the year right, which this time he couldn't bring himself to ask. It was getting too embarrassing, the way people reacted to that question.

And what was he thinking--the students weren't studying for finals obviously, they were in the middle of the semester. Meanwhile the lifeguard was talking to him about something else, which he hadn't been hearing after being wrapped up in how do you kill a week now?

What she was saying was next time please wear a swimsuit, but she had a smile behind it and she wasn't going to write him up or anything. He told her don't worry about that, and got directions to the BART train and also where he could get something to eat cheap, and she told him Top Dog on Durant Avenue, and pointed in that direction.

She was right, the dogs were good, and you had a choice of about five types, which they grilled to order right in front of you, the whole place a hundred times better than the thatched roof job on the way to Uffington. You stood at a counter and it was tight, and some guy with a backwards Oakland A's hat had a newspaper spread out, pretty obnoxious, but on the top of the page above the headlines Pike was able to confirm the year, 1989.

Maybe it was because you were a block from campus, or maybe because it was a beautiful day out, sunny and warm for late October, or maybe just that he'd been too preoccupied to notice, especially until he had some food in his stomach-- but *man*, there were a lot of beautiful women around here.

He wondered, could the current crop, the 2016 ones, be as attractive as as they are here at the moment, in front of him?

He doubted it. It killed him to think that when he returned to Beacon these girls would be in their late forties, plenty of wear and tear on them at that point, a few of them even grandmas.

But why think about that right now, appreciate it for what it was . . . and this was turning into *some* vantage point indeed.

The dude next to him continued to hover over the too-wide newspaper so Pike decided to at least pick his brain. He asked him, did it show anything about high school football games that weekend.

The guy was surprisingly friendly and put on his glasses and looked it up in the fine print on the inside back page of the sports section. He asked what school in particular and Pike said Galileo, over in the city, and the guy announced that yeah, they were playing Lowell tonight on the road.

“Where’s Lowell?” Pike said.

“Out near Stonestown,” the guy said. “You’re not from around here, I’m guessing . . . Most of your city schools over there, they don’t have lights, so they play on Saturdays, or else Friday afternoons.”

“But Lowell does? Have lights?”

“Yeah, they’re the rich public school. Same budget as all the rest, but they soak in the donations . . . They field pretty good teams, too. Don’t let anyone tell you rich kids can’t play.”

“You seem to know a lot about it,” Pike said. “Did you play?”

“Me? Nah.”

Pike decided this guy might have an angle, and either way he could use as much help as he could get. He said, “I’m thinking a player might get hurt out there, one of these games . . . How would you stop that?”

“You mean, like legislate it? Water down the rules so it’s safer?”

“Well that’s a separate idea, and that might be good too . . .”

“But what you’re asking,” the guy getting into it now, “how you keep a kid safe during the actual event? Like tonight?”

“Something like that, yeah,” Pike said.

“Well I could be wrong, but you don’t strike me like you played either . . . or you wouldn’t be asking that. Fact is, it’s a brutal sport. You can’t control it, too many variables.”

Pike was wondering again how he might have blindsided Anthony in the Fresno game. Neither one of them saw each other? He might have to find out about that actually, just out of curiosity.

“That’s what I’m thinking too,” Pike said to the guy. “Where’s Lowell at again though? You say . . . near *Flint Town*?”

“Stonestown. A mall. Kind of a lame one . . . you thinking of checking it out?”

“I don’t know. I kind of miscalculated, I have to kill a week. Might be something to do.”

The guy fidgeted a little, and folded up the sports section. “You got wheels?” he said.

“No, not here.”

“Well . . . maybe I could give you a lift. I always enjoy a good high school battle.”

The guy didn’t seem like a serial murderer or anything, so Pike said that’d be great.

“I have to go to work first though,” he said.

“Ah.”

“But we got time, the game starts at 7:30, what I just read in the paper.”

Pike was thinking it must be around 2, 2:30 now. “What kind of work?” he said.

“I play chess . . . down on Telegraph.”

“Dang . . . for money you mean?”

“Yeah, it can be kind of a hustle. It pays the bills. The city tends to more lucrative. North Beach, Ghirardelli Square . . . you get the high-flying tourists over there. But there are pros and cons either way.”

“So you don’t go to Cal?”

“What would I want to do that for?” the guy said, looking at him funny.

Pike left it alone, and the guy told him to meet him at 6:30 in front of Moe’s Books.

Pike took his time the rest of the afternoon. He had a long look at the campus, very nice, different than Utah State which had been impressive too. There was a little more energy here though, it seemed like.

At 6:30 true to his word there the guy was. He had a chessboard and a box of pieces and a clock under his arm. “You did okay then?” Pike said.

“About the usual. There’s an old guy I can normally count on on Fridays. Prides himself on being from Brooklyn, street tough and all. Good player back in the day but loses focus now in the endgame.”

“So, is it speed chess, or what?” Not really knowing how that worked, but he’d heard of it.

“Oh yeah. You can’t waste time with these people, you’d go broke.”

Traffic into the city was bad, and the game had started by the time they got there. On the way over, the guy, now named Jerry, had been talking non-stop on a variety of subjects, all pretty interesting, but Pike tuned a lot of it out.

One thing he was worried about, which seemed ridiculous at this point, was getting back in time for the movies with Jocelyn. He still was trying to get to know her, wasn’t sure how it felt about her, but one thing for sure, she wouldn’t appreciate him flaking out on her twice in a row.

If he’d gotten here around 12:30 and had to stay for a week now, that would be translate to 7 hours of Beacon time, so at the minimum, he wouldn’t get home until 7:30, while he was supposed to pick her up at 7:00.

You could probably maneuver that and pull it off, but it wasn’t how you scripted it.

Bottom line, it would be great to get out of here before then, but the question, no more resolved than 2 weeks ago when he’d run into Henry at the gas station (*and unbelievable that that was only 2 weeks ago in real time*) was how *would* you?

Pike supposed for starters you’d observe the guy playing tonight, in his last game where he *wasn’t* going to get hurt, you get a bead on him, his teammates, the coach, the whole nine yards . . . and maybe a lightbulb goes on.

Pike and Jerry grabbed a seat on the top row of the home side of the field under the little PA announcer’s booth. Aside from everything else, it was interesting to see the difference between the style of play back then, and what Pike was used to.

“Jeez,” he said to Jerry, at end of the first quarter, “no read-option, no spread? No 4 wides on 3rd down? . . . And they keep huddling.”

“What are you talking about?” Jerry said.

They played just as hard as current guys did, Pike was convinced, but this level of 1989 ball was bad. Not to mention, there was no imagination. Most plays went straight up the middle, and the quarterbacks threw the ball only occasionally.

Pike said, “It’s like they need a jump start. No one’s playing to win, they’re playing not to lose.”

Jerry waved his hand like Pike didn’t know what he was talking about, and Pike started zeroing in on number 34 Jeff Geraghty. He found him pretty quick out there because he was making plays and the announcer had been calling his name. Jeff wasn’t a real big guy but he had one of those motors that kept running in 5th gear, the kind of player coaches love.

He was playing linebacker on defense and rotating in at fullback when they had the ball. Galileo was scrappy, kind of like Jeff himself, and they engineered a goal line stand and at halftime led 12 - 7 over Lowell.

Pike went underneath the stands to the snack bar and got a snow cone, and there was a trailer that acted as the visitor's locker room, and you could see some of the Galileo kids sitting in there on their little stools.

There were parents milling around, like they were going give them a cheer or a boost when they came out of the locker room for the second half, and Pike realized with sudden alarm that Henry was standing there with his and Jeff's parents.

The guy was thinner and a bit more animated maybe, but otherwise he didn't look that different.

He wouldn't know Pike, obviously, but there was something about making contact with the guy, even eye contact, that didn't feel right. Pike got out of there quick, and walked around to the Lowell side.

Lowell had the same set up, a trailer for their locker room too, but a bigger one. And the same deal with the parents, waiting to root the players on when they came back out.

Which they did momentarily, and there was some clapping and some big *Yays* and some *Go Cardinals*, and the players were back on the field loosening up for the 2nd half, and the parents were climbing back up into the stands.

The announcer started up and you could faintly hear the referee's whistle, and then the band got real loud and the fans went into their kickoff count-down routine, and the game was underway again.

Except Pike was still under the stands, outside the Lowell locker room.

Hmm . . .

He thought about it for a couple minutes, trying to keep the big picture in mind.

Then he went up the three little steps and poked his head inside the trailer, looked around, and asked if anyone was there.

There was some major cheering from this side of the field, which meant Lowell either scored or made a big play, and some people were stomping on the bleachers in rhythm.

No one answered Pike that they were there, so he walked inside the locker room.

His first thought, which he shouldn't have been worrying about right now but couldn't help it was, *Jeez, they got no security around here, I could clean the whole place out.*

There weren't any actual lockers he could see, or any other place where you could lock up your stuff, it was just one wide open room with these cheap pressboard panels that tried to create little separated cubbies for the players.

In plain sight right now he could see at least three wallets and a couple of watches, but obviously that wasn't why he was here.

There were over-sized red duffel bags with white **L's** on them back near the rear exit, and Pike started picking through them. He found three helmets, all looking like they needed some repair, with the facemask loose on one and broken on another and missing on the third.

He picked up the first one and worked it onto his head. It was little tight and the facemask wobbled around, but it should work.

Then he hunted around for a pair of shoulder pads. There was only one pair of those, and it was almost in two pieces and you probably couldn't make *that* work, without a bunch of tape at least, but then Pike spotted a pair in one of the cubbies that looked fine.

All he needed now was a jersey and pants, and there was a jersey hanging on a hook right in front of his nose. The pants were a problem, but he picked through some stuff and eventually found a pair balled up near the one toilet they had in the place, and this didn't bode well, but Pike cautiously picked them up and inspected them and they didn't seem that bad.

There were a couple of problems. One, he didn't have a pair of cleats. He didn't see any laying around, and even if he did it would be hit or miss with the size. So he was going to have deal with this with what he had on, which were some off-brand imitation Nike's that he'd picked up on sale at Target that were okay for walking around but that was about it.

The other thing, how do you handle it with the clothes you're wearing? Do you come back and get them, and take the time to change *again*, or what?

Pike wasn't sure, how it might or might not play out. So what he did, he put on the equipment and the uniform and hung up what he was wearing in one of the cubbies, doubling up on some kid's stuff that was hanging there . . . except he didn't leave his wallet, he stuffed that into his uniform pants, along with his keys too, unfortunately. He was thinking he'd been an idiot to bring his keys, *what would you need them for* . . . but it was what it was.

According to the scoreboard clock above the far end zone, there were 3 minutes and 19 seconds left in the third quarter when Pike popped his head, helmet and all now, out from under the Lowell stands and checked out the action.

Lowell had the ball and was driving, and they were pounding it up the middle, picking up 5 yards a shot, real boring football still. 34 wasn't in the game at the moment for Galileo

and Pike spotted him across the field on the sideline, watching, but down on one knee . . . Unreal. *Could Jeff be injured somehow, and not be going back in?* Which would be a disaster at this point, not to mention a totally unexpected twist . . . but two plays later one of the coaches motioned to him and he bolted up and charged back on the field, full speed ahead, and Pike could relax that he was fine and they'd just been giving him a little breather.

Lowell got it inside the 10, and then made the curious decision of trying to pass the ball, even though Galileo sure didn't look like they could stop the simple running game at this point. The Lowell quarterback didn't seem all that comfortable throwing to his left, and that's where they went with it, some sort of mis-direction play that looked out of synch from the start, and one of the Galileo backs picked it off and cake-walked 90 yards the other way for a touchdown.

The Lowell kids were deflated by that, and trailed in the game now and the stands were subdued as well. Meanwhile Pike, not exactly running but moving at a reasonable pace that hopefully wouldn't attract any special attention, made his way to the Lowell sideline.

He remembered his number from the jersey being 86, and hoped that wouldn't attract any undue attention either, along of course with the street shoes that were badly out of place.

The Galileo placekicker teed the ball up and Lowell trotted out the return team, and Pike looked around and thank God there was Jeff was on the kicking team, like he figured he might be, lining up on the right side of the formation, the third guy in from the sideline ready to race downfield and make the tackle.

The Lowell band cued up their kickoff drill, not as loud this time, and the kid laid his foot into the ball and it was in the air, and Pike raced onto the field and made a beeline for Jeff who was angling toward the Lowell kid who caught it, and Pike barrelled into Jeff, careful not to hit up around the head, but Jeff went down like a shot nonetheless, and Pike had a vivid flashback to when he laid out Anthony on that night when it all began and couldn't quite believe it.

Someone made the tackle and the play was over, and the whole place got real silent, and soon the trainers from both teams were on the field tending to Jeff, and the Lowell coaches were all out there too, and Pike noticed Henry and his parents hustling out there from the stands.

It was the weirdest thing to be thinking at that moment, but Pike found himself wondering what Jerry thought of the whole thing, the guy from Berkeley who drove him here,

who he'd essentially abandoned at halftime . . . doubtful he'd realize Pike was involved, but not out the question.

He stood there for a minute, frozen in place like everyone else, and then he decided it'd be a good idea to get a move on.

There was an ambulance standing by in the parking lot, which was standard at football games, and good to see that was case even back in '89, and as the thing drove onto the field, kind of wobbling it way on the beat up turf, no siren on but the red light spinning, this seemed like the right time to head the other way, out *into* that same parking lot where it came from, and *fast*.

In other words, not a good option at this point to duck back into the Lowell trailer-locker room and get rid of the football gear and pick up your regular clothes. Yeah, you'd blend in better if you could switch it back up, but too much risk getting caught.

So Pike crossed the parking lot, and trotted out the gate that the cars used. One guy spotted him, some old guy who was relieving himself in the bushes it looked like, but didn't he seem to have any reaction and went back to his business.

Pike had no idea where to go, so he headed toward where there were the least amount of lights, and a few blocks away surprisingly was a big lake, Lake Merced, though he didn't know what it was called. He stuck to the sidewalk path around the lake and about a half mile down there was a little turnout that went down to the edge of the lake, and there were some benches and a couple of industrial garbage cans, and Pike jammed the helmet, the shoulder pads and the jersey into them, though it wasn't all that easy.

Now he was running around in his T-shirt and the gold football pants, which came down to the bottom of his knees and did not present a particularly subtle look. But you had to at least leave those on, otherwise you were in your boxers and then someone would call the police on you for sure.

The ideal thing would be to stick around overnight and get an update on Jeff, and Pike considered that. In fact that's what he assumed he'd doing this week, sticking around and figuring out some *other* way to screw up Jeff . . . before his brain kicked in and he improvised to Plan B . . . and of course that only happened because he'd noticed Henry at the snackbar on the Galileo side and didn't want to be running into him.

His new friend Jerry on the way over here had told him about a hostel at Fort Mason, ironically very close to Galileo high school, but a long way from here now, since Lowell was on the other side of the city.

The reason to stick around was a) make sure you did a sufficient job on Jeff and he wasn't going to be able to play next week, and b) make sure you didn't *kill* Jeff out there just now.

But Pike was tired and there comes a point where you've got to go with your gut . . . which it seemed he'd told himself in one of his other ventures recently, though he couldn't remember what the situation was there . . . but either way the hope *here* was he'd broken some of Jeff's ribs.

Ribs were a tough thing to play through. Pike in the Ridgley game his junior year, way before he found his new strength, when he was just an average safety platooning with another guy, cracked one.

You taped it up and all that but it was rough. It hurt to even take a deep breath. In Jeff's case, there was hopefully widespread damage involved, to multiple ribs. It wouldn't be the worst thing if he had to spend a night or two in the hospital, since then for sure, no doctor would permit him to play.

What Pike had been worried about was there would be another game after next week's one. Anthony, when he told the story, said Jeff's accident happened in the *championship* game, which would sort of explain why they stuck Jeff back in at the end even though he was on a gimpy ankle.

That didn't sit right with Pike, the season being over that early, but Jeff confirmed it on the car ride over, that there were a couple incidents this season, one of them a bench-clearing brawl between two teams, and the league stepped in and cancelled the playoffs which normally took place in November.

Sitting there in the dark by the lake for a minute, Pike felt a little like he was ducking out of a play before you got to Act 3 . . . which he actually did at Hamilton last spring, when he'd told a bunch of people he'd come to their performance of *Hair*, which about a hundred of them had been working on for months, but it was so bad and so much of the singing was off-key that Pike slipped out of there with about twenty minutes to go, and of course at school on Monday told everyone how great it was.

There were some bright lights not too far away, and Pike followed them, and they ran you into that Stonestown mall that Jerry had mentioned.

The place was pretty much shut down except for some bar-restaurants, and Pike took a walk around the perimeter, scoping it out for any pre-1956 opportunities.

Unfortunately the place looked a little too modern, as did the whole neighborhood near Lowell High School for that matter, and none of it felt like an original part of San Francisco but more an afterthought.

There *were* a couple guys setting something up though, in one of the open areas that fed into the stores. There was a little stage being raised, and all the outdoor tables and chairs were being pulled out of there.

Pike asked one of them what was going on and the guy told him a car show. Pike said *tonight?* And the guy looked at him like was an idiot and said no, tomorrow. Pike asked what *kind* of car show, and the guy said a *classic* one, and went back to work.

Pike thought *that* might be interesting and wanted to ask the guy, did the cars start showing up early . . . remembering when they had these deals from time to time in Beacon guys would start rolling in early, sometimes *real* early, to get the best spot or whatever advantage they were shooting for.

It didn't take that long, maybe an hour, before an old T-Bird showed up, followed by a '56 Chevy, and then an old hot rod a lot older than that, with the rumble seat in back . . . A guy and his wife in that one, both of them having fun, the guy with a baseball cap on that had pins and decorations all over it.

They got out and asked one of the set-up guys a question, and the guy pointed across the mall, and the man and wife headed that way.

Pike watched them go. He casually tried the passenger door of the roadster, got in, closed the door, and no one seemed to notice a thing as he went into his mind control routine and high-tailed it back to Beacon.

Chapter 15

This time he wasn't so lucky though. He didn't make it exactly to Beacon, much less back into The Box, which would have been the cleanest way . . . although it's possible Hannamaker could still be using it, and have his friend with him too, since Pike had to remind himself that only an hour had ticked off in Beacon time since he'd departed under the surprise pressure of Jack showing up.

Where he ended up this time was in the weeds along the side of the service road, out by the Interstate, about a quarter mile from In-n-Out.

This had to be because he was hungry, and that must have overridden everything else, even though he didn't want it to.

Part of it, he assumed, was his darn feet had been wet all day since he started off in the swimming pool near Memorial Stadium. His shoes hadn't come close to drying out at all, and every step he took he could hear the sponginess of the water in there.

This, combined with some of the other unexpected proceedings he'd found himself in the middle of, most particularly playing in a football game, at least for one play, must have upped his metabolism.

The thing now, since he was here anyway . . . should you go in and eat?

He confirmed that he still had the wallet and the keys wedged into the football pants . . . and that was another thing, the Lowell team pants that he'd hijacked had survived the trip . . . so what other ramifications might that suggest? You could pick up anything you wanted in the past and bring it forward? Or you had to be wearing it? Or it had to be under a certain size, or what? You couldn't obviously bring back *a car* or something, for instance.

Forget this for now, Jeez.

Pike went ahead and got out of the weeds and walked to In-n-Out and ate. It was right around 2, a busy Saturday, people coming in in waves, including some kids' sports teams, and once he got in there he was comfortable the uniform pants weren't attracting any unusual attention.

Though at the end, as he was finishing up, three sophomore girls came in that he recognized and they started giggling and looking at him funny. Two of them had been playing tennis with Hailey that time when Pike rode the bicycle over to the high school courts and intercepted her, which fed a few hours later into the failed attempt to keep Mrs. Milburn from walking Mark.

The odd part was, this third girl now, Pike recognized *her* from Henry's SUV when they'd picked him up hitchhiking. Which meant she went to Bellemeade . . . so what the heck was she doing palling around with the other two?

It wasn't worth trying to figure out . . . What he *could* use them for, any of the three, was borrowing their phone. Since he hadn't brought his with him to Berkeley.

They tried to play difficult and asked him what he needed it for, but one of the tennis girls handed hers over . . . Now who to call? It seemed a little rude to bother Hannamaker, so Pike tried Marty Clarke but couldn't reach him. Who else? So he figured why not Anthony, since they were getting along pretty well and the guy seemed agreeable.

Without any fanfare, Anthony said he'd be there in 20 minutes.

Pike waited out front. This was going to be kind of a trip, having to explain his current get-up to Anthony. Whatever he'd come up, no matter how creative, it wouldn't matter . . . The main thing, the big picture which he hadn't let himself absorb yet, he was back, *safe*, and maybe did something good.

And if he didn't . . . if his little maneuver up there on the football field hadn't *taken* somehow, he didn't want to know about it yet. Put a little distance on the situation, then in due time check with Henry and see what the story was . . . but not too quick, why be discouraged right away if it didn't go through?

Anthony pulled up and Pike noticed another person with him, and son of a gun it was Andrea. He should have expected this. Anthony looked him over but didn't say anything, and Andrea politely got in back and let Pike sit up front.

Pike made the mistake of asking Anthony if he was doing anything over Christmas, and Anthony went into a whole long speech about how yeah, he'd gotten a job unloading pallets overnight at Costco, and all the exciting specifics that went along with that, though Pike did feel a little guilty that he hadn't rounded up any job himself.

Then about halfway back to Beacon Anthony blurted out, "My girlfriend here, she says you invited her to your basement." Anthony was chewing gum and his eyes were on the road, and his expression didn't change.

Pike tried to find Andrea back there with the corner of his eye but couldn't. He said, "I did . . . In fact what about tonight later? You guys doing anything?"

Anthony said they weren't, and that was a possibility, and Pike felt like the guy was okay with it now and he'd dodged a bullet. They dropped him off . . . and speaking of the basement, screw it, Pike decided he wasn't going to avoid Jack any more, plus it could be interesting to see who else might be down there. And right now he could use a little change of pace.

It looked like his parents were home, both cars sitting there, though he didn't see Jack's parked on the street, but either way he went around back and used the outside entrance.

One thing that seemed pretty curious . . . why would Andrea tell Anthony he offered to show her The Box? . . . And *had* he even? He couldn't really remember. Andrea had said something about liking the challenge of climbing over the wall, but Pike was thinking she'd *invited* herself, after he'd mentioned the place for some reason . . . Whatever.

He hoped they wouldn't show up tonight, regardless. He already had his hands full keeping Jocelyn happy this time at the movies, let's see how that went first before you piled on.

Pike knocked on The Box first just in case, and then dropped in. No one home, but just like the other time, there was a lingering fragrance. It might have been slightly different than last time, more flowery maybe, but it was equally fresh, and the traces of recent human presence seemed pretty obvious.

Pike's laptop was sitting there still open, though someone had hit the pause button on the radio thing, apparently having had enough of Big Dave Burke on the noon to 3 show on 620 KFCB.

He was surprised to see his phone there as well. It was correct not to bring it with him, but it was sloppy to leave it in The Box and not up in his room.

In any case, he checked his messages and there were two from Andrea, that had come in a couple hours ago, when he was away. This was starting to get weird now, and he deleted them without reading them.

And there was one from Dani. Pike was a bit concerned about this one. She didn't text him often, and when she did it was usually to answer one of his, though anything was possible. But still, he felt he should get back to her . . . even though right now, sinking into the beanbag chair, he sure could use a monster nap.

“Oh hey hun,” Dani said. Jeez, *hun* now. Pike thought of the waitress he had at the cafe in Orland shortly after he arrived there, who called everyone hun.

“What’s up?” Pike said. “Or how’s tricks?” He was started to feel a little punch-drunk, all the tension of the last several hours working its way out.

“I’m sure you’re bracing yourself, that this about me again . . . more bad news.”

“That’s what I’m thinking, yeah.”

“I’ll get that out of the way then, there’s nothing to report in that regard, no updates.”

“Good. Except you’re still under house arrest, so to speak, at the motel and all.”

“True enough, but I’m finding it’s okay actually, the scene here. And there’s a social element to it as well . . . If you have to wait something out, this isn’t a terrible place to have to do it, honestly.”

Pike didn’t like the sound of that. “What *kind* of social scene?” he said.

“Oh, just a few gals I’ve met. They’re flight attendants actually, they live here part-time . . . Also a gentleman, a distinguished one.”

Fuck. “WHAT are you doing, with some *other* dude?” Pike said.

“Hun, let up, will you? You are in Siberia on this one. I could not be in the company of a more upstanding individual . . . and for Gosh sake’s, I’m not even *in* his company, I simply see him in the bar occasionally for a drink.”

Pike gave it a second. He was feeling pressure mounting in the right side of his head, half-way up. “And then after that . . . you retire to the hot tub, is that it? Bringing those couple of drinks along?”

It was a cheap shot, but so what.

Dani said, “I’m not going there . . . do you want to know what I messaged you about though?”

“Fine,” Pike said.

You could hear Dani take a deep breath and then exhale.

“This may not be good,” she said. “There was an incident last weekend at an airshow in Ohio. A patron went nuts apparently, and started physically beating up members of the crowd, who were standing in a designated area watching the display . . . You know what airshows are, right? Vintage planes, and stunts and related activities.”

“Come on,” Pike said.

“It was random, as though the person was consumed by some sort of psychotic break . . . There were major injuries, but luckily thank God, everyone is out of the woods and expected to live.”

“But what.” Pike did not have a good feeling about this.

“This perpetrator, a male in his 50’s--I don’t mean to sound like the authorities--but this guy was very difficult to subdue. It quite literally took almost an army.”

“Ah man,” Pike said. “This was where I was afraid you were going . . . Sooner or later, you knew it was coming, some psychopath goes to the wrong dentist, gets hooked up with our same crap.”

Dani said, “Well they arrested him, so at least that part is good for now.”

“That’s not good enough. Sooner or later, something’ll happen again . . . They’re not aware of what they’re dealing with.”

“Yes, but please hear me out. Here’s the kicker . . . You remember my online friend, right? The New Yorker?”

“I know who you’re talking about,” Pike said, getting a very sick feeling now.

“Pike . . . this man . . . in Ohio. He was one of the organ recipients . . . from Erline’s . . . my friend’s . . . husband.”

Pike didn’t say anything, and Dani kept going. “The way these things work, they are supposed to be 100 percent confidential . . . Unless both parties agree to a waiver . . . Which Erline never did. But . . . him being law enforcement and all, her late husband, word travelled quickly, and the connection was made and the information found its way to Erline.”

“How many were there?” Pike said, fully focused now.

“Excuse me?”

“How many others *were there*, who received transplants from this donor?”

“That I’m not sure of. I could ask Erline, she may or may not know.”

“We need to find the others,” Pike said. There was a matter-of-fact, yet firm, declarative edge to his words, which took Dani by surprise . . . *And maybe Pike himself, as well.*

“If I’m following you correctly,” she said, “you’re concerned this man . . . in Ohio . . . may have been adversely affected by the transplant? Do you mean not just physically, but mentally as well?”

“We don’t know,” Pike said.

Chapter 16

Jocelyn threw him a curveball and wanted to see a foreign movie she'd heard good things about. That would be the *last* way Pike wanted to spend a couple hours tonight, but what could he say.

The movie was playing at a theater you never went to, a place called The Surf which was out near the old animal sanctuary that they moved a couple years ago to Fresno.

Jocelyn was in pretty good spirits and pretty talkative, as though their relationship was steady and Pike walking out on her last weekend was forgotten about. She said a few things that just didn't resonate with him at all though, which he guessed were more references to stuff that happened between them that he didn't know about . . . meaning before he came back from Chico and joined the current reality . . . but he had the hang now of faking it.

They started off in their seats, he had his arm around her and she was leaning on his shoulder and they were working their hands around each other's to get a handful of popcorn.

Then the movie got kind of grim, and Jocelyn leaned the other way. The film was Iranian of all things. Pike couldn't figure out the language they were speaking, he didn't think there was a language actually *called* Iranian, but you read the subtitles and you stayed up to speed.

It wasn't bad, it was more compelling than you would have thought. Pike was thinking it was the kind of story that could hit a nerve wherever you happened to live. There's an earthquake and they have to move out of their apartment and stay in another one, but then the door in the new place gets left unlocked by accident and it goes from there.

The women in the movie, and Pike assumed in the country period, had a tough life, and maybe it was because of that, who knows, but Jocelyn wanted to leave.

Pike was enjoying himself by that point, the reverse of what he expected, and he wanted to find out if and how they were going to catch the guy. Jocelyn stuck it out for another 10 minutes and told him, in a regular tone of voice now, not worried about keeping it down, that if he didn't come with her they were going to have a major issue.

So Pike got up and left with her and when they got in the truck he asked what she wanted to do now and she said she wasn't sure. Pike suggested maybe bowling, a little mini golf, some go-kart racing . . . or just cruising around, see what might develop.

Jocelyn looked up from checking her phone, and told Pike he was a nice guy, and she couldn't pinpoint it, but he'd *changed*. She said it would be best if they didn't date each other for a while.

Of course when you put it like that, what you're really saying is *this is stupid, it's all over*.

Pike was a little stunned. He didn't say much, he just threw it in gear and drove her home, and he watched her unlatch her gate and angle toward the front door, and then she disappeared inside, though she did give a little wave at the end but the energy level was nil.

He drove away slowly, trying to make sense of it. It wasn't the worst thing, he'd live, it might even be for the best, but it was still tough getting slapped around.

Besides feeling a little sorry for himself, the day was hitting him hard now, and when he turned on 7th Street and crossed Miller he thought he noticed something else.

There was a house, big, set back, an old wood-frame job like you see with the wide wrap-around front porch. There were four people getting out of a Mercedes and heading toward it, two men, two women, and they were dressed fancy, the men in shiny blazers the women in tight skirts and low cut tops, and Pike could have sworn one of the women was Frankie the librarian.

He was tired, and also was passing by at 25 miles an hour, and anything was possible . . . but it sure looked like Frankie.

Anyhow, thankfully his parents and brother and sister were out, and he opened the fridge and took a long swig of orange juice directly from the carton, and pretty much collapsed on the living room couch with the TV changer in his hand.

He flipped channels and settled on *House Hunters* which was sometimes fun, you saw how people lived other places and you pictured yourself there. There was one finishing up from Richmond, Virginia, and Pike was about to pack it in for the night except he noticed the preview for the next one, and it was Palm Springs.

Nothing to do with Dani exactly, but you got a feel for the atmosphere, and in this one you had a guy and his wife, the guy was a pilot, doing a smart thing, looking for a condo down there that had the right ingredients, so they could rent it out easily when they weren't in town.

You could get *into* the idea of Palm Springs, Pike could see that. It had a little of the flavor you found in Manhattan Beach, minus the ocean of course, but you had the same easygoing, friendly, sunshiny pace and people seemed happy.

Dani though, he was thinking again now, seemed *too* happy. Could she really be hooking up with *another* person, and once again for the wrong reasons . . . *when she's about to be friggin on trial for murdering the previous one?*

And that wasn't even including what happened to Marcus before that, or whatever the dude's name was who ended up in the wall.

The *House Hunters* episode ended, the pilot and his wife made the right decision, they bought the one that was turn-key and needed no work, and Pike shut off the TV and went upstairs to go to bed.

He was brushing his teeth when the doorbell rang.

On no. He'd made the mistake in Anthony's car of inviting them over. No way did he *mean* it, but it was the right move at the time, spur of the moment, to allay Anthony's suspicions about whether something was brewing between him and Andrea.

And naturally it was Anthony standing there, no surprises, with Andrea tagging along, holding onto his arm.

"We're not disturbing you or nothing, are we?" Anthony said. "You've looked better, to be honest."

"Nah, I was hoping you'd stop by," Pike lied. "Come on in . . . The Box, the place you were asking me about, it's downstairs, so we can do that."

"It truly is a lovely home," Andrea said. "When I spoke to your mom, I couldn't really see in, so I didn't appreciate it as much."

Oh my God. What was this person's problem?

"When'd you speak to his mom?" Anthony said.

"Where's Jocelyn by the way?" Andrea said. "Is she going to meet up with us?"

"Nah, I dropped her off . . . Not that long ago in fact . . . We saw an interesting movie, 'The Salesman' I think it was called." Pike was hoping this might deflect what Anthony had just asked about, but it didn't.

"You spoke to his *mom*?" he said again.

"Yes I did," Andrea said. "Pike invited me to go for a jog, but he'd already left."

"Let's head down there," Pike said, trying again to re-direct it. "The trick is, the only wrinkle, you have to use the rope, then you're on top. Piece of cake at that point."

Pike opened the door to the basement stairs and Anthony and Andrea followed but Anthony's expression was not good, his eyes were narrow and he was clearly trying to sort things out.

Pike showed them the set-up, and was talking all about it to distract Anthony, how it came about, him and Jack, the concept, and then them forgetting the door part but it turning out better this way, in the end.

"Cute. Reminds you of a children's fort," Andrea said.

Pike didn't appreciate The Box being referred to that way, but he had to admit she wasn't completely off. He said, "Welp, whatever. Sometimes that's not the worst thing I guess." He didn't know what he was saying exactly, but Anthony surprisingly chimed in, "No it's not."

So maybe that tension part had diffused, but the thing now, adding to the increasingly awkward stress level, was Andrea was wearing a skirt, and not that long of a one.

Pike said, as casually as he could, "You wanna . . . borrow some sweats, or something?"

"Thank you, I'm fine," she said, and she took off her shoes and grabbed the rope, getting ready to climb up, and Pike said he'd be right back and went in the little bathroom that was down here and washed his hands for a minute to kill time, and when he came out he called over there and Anthony said they were both in.

That part was fine, but either way *this was one strange girl*. She was mischievous, Pike was convinced, but there was an intrigue part as well, which was a little hard to shake off.

Pike was about to ask them if they wanted anything to eat or drink, but one of them had started playing the drums, so he went upstairs to see what might be available. There wasn't much, except one of those assorted 24 packs of beer that his dad would pick up at Costco, heavy-duty bitter stuff that Pike couldn't tolerate at all, but he grabbed three bottles and nabbed some salami out of the fridge for good measure and went back down.

Right about then the side door started making some noise and who comes strolling in but Hannamaker.

The drums had stopped for the moment and Pike made eye contact with him and pointed toward The Box with his head and said quietly, "Well, the gang's all here."

Jack mouthed "Who?" and Pike told him, and Jack said well, don't mind him, he was going to crash on the couch, and Pike could smell some liquor on him as he passed by.

"Tough evening?" Pike said, and Jack answered over his shoulder, "Tell me about it."

Pike passed half the stuff over the wall and came back down for the rest and lo and behold the doorbell rings again. Hard to hear from down in the basement but just loud enough where you could make out the sing-song tune.

Hmm . . . who could *this* be now? There weren't too many options left.

Pike went upstairs and opened up and Cathy Carlisle was standing there decked out pretty nice, with none other than . . . sheepish, staring at his feet, a big cast on his right hand . . . Foxe.

Pike didn't know quite what to say, so Cathy said, "Is Jack here?"

Pike said, "I think he's available . . . do you want me to check? Or . . . you can come on in if you want." Hoping they wouldn't, but that wasn't going to matter.

They followed Pike inside, and he pointed the way to the basement and he tried not to look at Foxe as he passed by, though it seemed like you could smell liquor on *him* too.

The other thing that made this weird of course was Pike, at least according to Hannamaker, had incredibly given Foxe and Cathy a key to the basement. That had also been pre- his return from Chico, so he wasn't aware of it, but either way it was a moment of lunacy. Obviously this time, considering the hand incident, Foxe and Cathy decided ringing the bell was the more sensible option.

Pike gave it a minute for things to resolve themselves down there, you could hear Hannamaker talking to Foxe and Cathy, and there were short bursts of laughter, so Pike figured, what the *hay*, I guess we can deal with this and he went back down.

It didn't take long before Jack, who Pike noticed now was wobbling a little, called him over and put his arm around him. He said, "Foxye, this is my boy here. He's a good man, he's bailed me out more than once . . . I forgot I even invited you over, but now I remember why . . . Dudes, let's let it go."

They were in the little living area down there, that Pike's dad had finished off years ago with the intent of remodeling the whole basement but he never got that far. Anthony and Andrea were still in The Box, and for all Pike knew they weren't even aware of Cathy and Foxe being here, or Hannamaker for that matter.

Pike tried to block it out but it was kind of bittersweet having Cathy there, since once upon a time, when he was going out with one of the original Cathy's, they spent some nice time down here. They were close.

It seemed like Jack wanted Pike and Foxe to embrace or shake hands and go all *Kumbaya* or something, but that wasn't going to happen, the best scenario was they'd tolerate

each other, and so be it. After a while Pike felt bad not at least offering them something, so he went upstairs again and rounded up more food and beverage, even though by now he noticed Foxe in his good hand was carrying a bag of Taco Bell, which seemed a little forward . . . you don't even know if someone's going to let you in, but you bring your own food like you own the joint? Plus it smelled good, which ticked Pike off. Whatever . . .

When Pike came back Jack was surprisingly lively, especially given how out-of-it he looked when he showed up a half hour ago and immediately announced he was going to crash. Now he was explaining to Foxe and Cathy different climbing maneuvers you could use to get into The Box, making sure to also highlight some details of his construction work . . . and with an unexpected party deal going on and everyone apparently happy, Pike decided it was a good time to go upstairs and call Mitch.

Chapter 17

His parents and brother and sister were home now and Pike made a little small talk, and on second thought figured the truck would be better than his room, more private, in case he got worked up for some reason and started talking real loud.

Mitch sounded like *he* might have had a couple beverages himself, and what could you do, it was a Saturday night.

“I called you for three reasons,” Pike said. “A, an update, B, a question, C, something bugging me.”

“Let’s go with C first,” Mitch said. You could hear some activity in the background, and Pike would bet *this* time Lucy was involved.

“Must be busy, all the retirees down there,” Pike said. “Where *are* you?”

“Son . . . I’m sitting poolside, and we have Mai-Tai’s with mini multi-colored umbrellas attached to the glass . . . I’m telling you, this really is the life.”

“I’m going to start with A,” Pike said. “I went to San Francisco, I felt like I was doing my duty. Now I’m back.” He couldn’t remember if he’d given Mitch much detail, or just the general idea that some guy broke his neck, but it didn’t matter.

“Ah . . . and this was where you were torn, in that did you need to dive *further* back?”

“Don’t use that word, *dive*,” Pike said.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Too many doofuses talk that way already . . . they go, ‘okay if everyone’s ready, let’s dive in’.”

“I wasn’t aware of that.”

“But yeah . . . I tried to stop the immediate thing, simple as that, and I’m hoping for the best.”

“Interesting . . . have you . . . confirmed it yet?”

“I want to wait a while. In case I fucked up . . . why get bad news too soon.”

“I can understand that,” Mitch said. “How’d you stop it? Or try to?”

“I don’t know, it just kind of came to me. I got there a week early, so I was already restless . . . What I did basically, I entered a game and made a play. Hopefully it was heavy-duty enough that the guy can’t play the next game.”

Mitch was working this around. “I think I understand . . . the *next* game, then, that was the key?”

Pike said that was his understanding, yeah.

Mitch said, “And do you know for a fact, you didn’t . . . *over-injure* . . . the individual?”

Mitch wasn’t stupid, and Pike was still a little worried about this too, that maybe he paralyzed the guy *himself*, which meant the whole trip was a total waste of time.

Pike said, “Jeez. No, not for sure. But why do you have to rain on my parade?”

“But what was it like otherwise? I’m dying to know . . . anything else you can tell me?”

“You mean 1989? Well one thing, the offenses back then, they were like watching paint dry.”

“I didn’t mean the football part.”

“The women were more beautiful, I’d say. Not as skinny as today, with all the gyms we got now, and the yoga and whatnot . . . Other than that, nothing jumped out, particularly.”

“That’s hard to believe, frankly,” Mitch said, “that your only real distinction is the women were more beautiful--which I can’t disagree with you on--but there must have been other specifics.”

“I was kind of busy,” Pike said. “If I had *dived-in* and examined the culture more carefully, I might have more for you.”

“Okay, I get it,” Mitch said. “No need for sarcasm.”

“B . . . what was B?” Pike said.

“A question, you said.”

“Okay maybe forget that, let’s go to C . . . The guy I told you about? Who died, but donated his organs first?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“One of the recipients, he went wild in a mall and hurt a bunch of people . . . actually it wasn’t a mall, it was one of those airshows.”

“Was he . . . empowered? Similarly to the donor?”

“It sounds like it . . .”

“But you’re not convinced.”

“What I’m not convinced of, is this thing didn’t mutate. Like I’ve been worrying about.”

“Understood,” Mitch said, “which is an ongoing concern. Let’s don’t jump the gun though . . . Do you know for a fact, this person wasn’t unstable to start with?”

“No. But another one goes off the deep end, we got a problem.”

“Then we could,” Mitch said.

When Pike finished with Mitch and exited his pick-up truck and came back in the house, everyone was asleep upstairs and it was nice and quiet.

Then he went downstairs, and too bad he couldn’t say the same for that situation.

Apparently they were all in there now, squeezed into The Box, Hannamaker and Foxe and Cathy, and of course Anthony and Andrea, and it didn’t seem like a harmonious group at the moment.

Pike listened for a minute, trying to size up what the problem was. It was hard to tell, but Hannamaker was in the middle of it, and there was some shuffling around and you could hear Jack say, “Okay now what you just said, you better be careful.”

It seemed like a good time to break it up, so Pike climbed the rope and dangled over the wall and asked did anyone need anything from upstairs, such as more salami and cheese.

“Hey looky who’s here,” Jack said.

“I’ll say,” Anthony said with a sly half-smile, “nice of you to join us.”

Foxe chimed in, “Maybe he thinks he’s too *good* to be hanging with us.” He hadn’t opened his mouth since he’d been here, that Pike had heard, *and this was how you did it?*

Pike was tempted to throw him back Hannamaker’s *what you said, you better be careful* deal, but it wasn’t worth it. Foxe had obviously been putting away some beer on top of what he might have had before he got here, and he’d loosened up, as had all three of these bozos for that matter. Cathy and Andrea weren’t saying anything but looked relaxed on the bean bag chairs, no doubt enjoying the entertainment.

What Pike said was, “How about some cheesecake?” He’d noticed one in the fridge, a big one all boxed up, obviously on tap for some designated use, but that didn’t matter. He was thinking some sugar along with plenty of fat might help take the edge off, and then hopefully he could get these idiots out of here and finally get to bed.

Everyone said fine, not a lot of enthusiasm behind it, but Pike went up and got the cheesecake and found some paper plates and forks and lugged the whole shebang over the wall and against his better judgment joined them in The Box.

Now Jack was getting into it with Anthony. “I did *not*,” Jack said.

“You just *did*,” Anthony said.

“Hold on,” Pike said. “Whatever it is, let’s just eat.”

“*This* guy now,” Anthony said, meaning Pike. “Didn’t want to embarrass him, but now that you bring it up . . .”

“Bring *what* up?” Jack said.

“Dude, get this,” Anthony said to Jack, like they’re good buddies all of a sudden. “The guy needs me to pick him up. He’s waiting for me in these football pants. Ancient ones.”

“When was *that*?” Jack said.

“Today,” Anthony said. “He’d just eaten too. What he might have needed those pants for is anyone’s guess.”

Everyone laughed. Pike felt like smacking Anthony, and in a perfect world he might have . . . though these days he’d have a tough time defining *a perfect world*.

“Anyways,” Anthony said, “Gillette’s problem, his real one, is he messed with my girlfriend behind my back.”

“That’s not good,” Foxe said, “and it’s not surprising, neither.”

“Oh yeah?” Anthony said. “You’re not surprised?” He took a long swig of beer and glared at Foxe now.

Foxe hadn’t meant it like that, but Anthony was at that point where *A*, you’re looking for trouble now, *seeking* it out, and *B*, *everyone* starts rubbing you the wrong way, which makes it easy.

“How’d he mess with her?” Jack said to Anthony.

“Haven’t figured it out yet, but I’m getting there, don’t worry,” Anthony said.

“Well,” Jack said, “maybe I can understand it. She’s an agreeable little gal.” He smiled and reached over Anthony and gave Andrea a playful squeeze on the arm.

Anthony stood up. “See this is what I’m talking about. You just did it again.”

Jack took his time finishing the bite of cheesecake he was working on, and then he put the plate down and brushed off his hands and stood up too.

Anthony threw the first punch and Jack staggered back and probably would have gone down if The Box wasn’t so small and the wall wasn’t right there, but as it was he used the wall to rebound forward and swung a wild haymaker which could have done a lot of damage but luckily for Anthony it only caught him on the very top of the head.

Then they locked up and started grappling, and Cathy and Andrea were scrambling now and pushing the drumset out of the way. Hannamaker was quicker and the better athlete but Anthony was strong at the core and hard to move, and you couldn't tell how this might go.

Their heads were rubbing together and they were pulling each other tight to avoid letting the other guy get leverage, but Jack was starting to figure out how to land some uppercuts and you could see Anthony was bleeding.

Anthony was a stubborn son of a bitch though and Pike could tell this was going to get ugly, and he yelled for them to stop, but that had no effect.

The girls were yelling too now, and even Foxe chimed in, that they made their point and that was enough.

Pike wasn't sure why but the expression *bull in a china closet* jumped out. It didn't exactly apply here but the fact was neither one of these doofuses was going to give in, and you weren't going to be able to break them up the conventional way.

Pike was *beyond* tired now . . . the day had started a *long* time ago, with him arriving in the swimming pool in Berkeley, and he wasn't in the mood.

He asked the girls and Foxe, who were sort of huddled together away from the action, to please step out of the way, and he sized up the wall behind them, and with the heel of his hand he casually but very firmly broke through the sheetrock.

He hated to mess up the meticulous details of Jack's job, that included the high-density insulation in the wall to absorb the sound of the drumset, which it had been doing a darn good job of too.

But it to be done, so he snapped off enough of the sheetrock so he could see what he was doing in there, and then he reached in, took a look at the rest of them to make sure they were still focused on Jack and Anthony going at it and not *him*, and grabbed one of the vertical studs, and snapped *that* off.

There was a big crack noise, and for a moment Jack and Anthony hesitated and looked over, and then they went right back to their business, which continued to consist of the two of them locking heads, and arms, except when Jack could now and then pull one of his out of there and get a good lick in on Anthony's increasingly bloody mug.

Pike pulled out the two broken pieces of 2 x 4. Jack had correctly installed studs every 16 inches, but now with one of them out of there you had a 32 inch gap, and a chance to get everybody out of this sucker. There wasn't anything left now except the outside sheetrock, and one solid high kick took care of that, and you were the looking at the basement and the couch

over in the corner which Jack had shown up intending to crash on before things spun out of hand.

Everyone was paying attention to the hole now and Jack and Anthony relaxed their grips on each other and Pike figured you bear-hug one of them, it doesn't matter which one, this nonsense is over, so he picked Anthony, and Anthony didn't like it but there was nothing he could do about it, and when he started giving Pike an extra-hard time, Pike picked him up like you would a belligerent kid and carried him out of The Box, and up and and out the side basement door and down to the street.

When they got out in the fresh air Anthony's level of aggression tapered off a notch, and soon he had nothing left in the tank and wasn't dangerous, and Pike went in his truck and found some napkins in the glove compartment that he'd saved from a Burger King run and helped Anthony get cleaned up. By this point Cathy was standing there with Foxe, and she said she'd be the designated driver and take everyone home, which ended up just being Anthony and Foxe, no sign of Andrea at the moment, but no one argued or even seemed to notice, and the three of them got in Cathy's car and were gone.

Pike went back in and the first thing he heard was snoring, and there was Hannamaker flat on his back on the couch sleeping away like nothing had happened, no blanket, no pillow, nothing, and all his clothes still on including his shoes.

There was no sign of Andrea at this point, but Pike couldn't worry about that, she'd figure it out, and probably already had. He dragged himself up to his room, and man did that bed look inviting, and he could finally get in and hopefully stay there about 15 hours.

He couldn't resist checking his computer one time first, and he hunched over his desk and there were a couple emails, not important, and he gave Facebook a look, and not much there either, and as he was pulling the laptop closed he felt two hands on his shoulders, and was stunned for a split second and then he knew whose they were.

"You really do . . . assert yourself," he said.

"You don't like it then?" Andrea said, gently rubbing his back, which at this moment felt better than anything had in two different time zones.

Pike let it happen for a while, and then turned around and looked at her and tried to make an evaluation . . . what *might* really be going on here . . . and he realized you couldn't know for sure, and that she probably didn't either, and he laid his hand on the back of her neck and eased her toward him and slowly kissed her, and he wasn't sure if it was right but it

sure didn't feel *wrong* . . . and for just a little while you were in a brand new time zone and the world made sense.

"I'll drive you home," Pike said finally.

Andrea looked a little disappointed. "What?" Pike said.

"You know . . ." she said.

"I *do* know . . . and you're not staying over. I got enough going on with Jack downstairs. It's going to be a crapshoot, what he's like when he wakes up . . . after that display tonight."

Pike was trying to keep it light. She said, "Well I'll look forward to hearing all about it." Sarcastic, but she had her purse and was ready to go.

They were quiet in the truck until they reached her block. Pike said, "You reminded me of someone at first. And now you don't."

Andrea said, "Is that good then? . . . Or are you disappointed?"

"More like relieved," Pike said.

Chapter 18

Monday at school was a little awkward. For various reasons Pike tried to avoid interacting with Hannamaker, Anthony, Cathy, Foxe and Jocelyn.

Andrea he wasn't sure about, but he figured don't go out of your way there either.

Jack had slept on that couch like he was drugged. Pike went down there around 1 on Sunday and he was still snoring away like an old man, and still with his shoes on.

At that point Pike woke him up, and directed his attention to The Box, which now needed some serious repair. Jack glanced at the big hole with no expression, cleared his throat hard like he was bringing up phlegm, and left without saying anything.

Pike went for a light jog after that, over to the old cemetery and back, and on the way home he made his decision to go Arizona.

Sometimes when you exercise, especially outside, your head becomes real clear and the riff-raff and clutter fall away and you can think simple and straight, and taking a little trip emerged as the right choice.

Partly it was the lunacy of the other night with the impromptu party that told him a change of scenery would be good, but more than that it was the deteriorating dynamic he was seeing between his parents.

And he missed Audrey, there was no denying it, and Christmas in Beacon with all the familiar sentimental stuff would only accentuate it.

Wednesday would be the last day of school before vacation . . . so . . . why not leave on Thursday?

He had a couple papers left to write, but he had the technique down pretty good, you just let it rip with as many extra words as you could so that you were turning in a paper longer than the requirement, and that normally got you a B. And you also wanted to write as fast as possible. He'd tried taking his time once and that didn't go over any better, in fact he was pretty sure he got a worse grade.

But forget all that for now. What Pike wanted to do today was drop in on his friend the librarian, and as soon as 8th period ended that's where he went.

Frankie was at her desk and looking a little stiffer than normal. "I'm glad you came by," she said. "Though I may not have as much leeway as I did. They canned the head librarian."

"The one who was never here?" Pike said.

"Exactly. And they elevated someone else. A younger man, more hard-nosed."

"I'll get right to it then," Pike said. "If someone happened to change their name . . . how do I locate them? Any ideas on that?"

"When?"

"When did they *do* it? Let's say 20 years ago, roughly."

"Where, what state?"

"Could be any of them . . . But how about California."

As usual, Frankie didn't ask any more questions than necessary, and she stuck to the task at hand. Though she did give Pike a look that said she wouldn't mind knowing more, if he volunteered it.

"These are the Chico people," Pike said. "I wasn't going to try to find them, but someone said what could it hurt . . . So I did, and came up empty . . . Which gave me the beginnings of a heart attack . . . Then someone else, she said maybe they changed their name. So I'm back to being more rational."

Frankie smiled. "We don't want any heart attacks. You can relax, there's always an explanation for an anomaly such as this."

Pike was thinking: *In a real world I'm with you . . . Not quite as confident here.*

But why throw a wrench in. He said, "So what do you think? Is there . . . like a database for legal name changes, or something?"

"What's not optimum," she said, "is the time frame. If it were in the last 10, 12, even 15 years there normally would be, as county clerk's offices nationwide have adopted computerized filing . . . Although if you are clever, even today, you can select a little-known rural county that still may do it the old fashioned way, and you might stay out of the system."

"You might be giving me too much information," Pike said. "I'm pretty darn sure these people, they weren't going to be taking it that far."

"That sounds understandable. They simply sought a clean, fresh start then." Leaving the door open again for Pike to fill in the blanks.

"My goal was to re-direct them," he said. "I'm starting to be convinced that I was actually successful . . . It's possible, in the process, they decided to take it a step further . . ."

Getting back to the timing though, if this thing pre-dates the computer, or whatever, could I drive to Chico and look it up in an office? Would that be one way?"

"Okay let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let me have a look around in our system first."

"Well thank you."

"But as a starting point, you feel they may have changed their names in Chico?"

"Like I say, it could have been years later, and *wherever* . . . But it could have been a *day* later too." Pike was thinking of Mr. Milburn in the motel room, and his reaction when Pike bent the gun.

"My sense is that Butte County was one of the later ones to fully automate," Frankie said. "I'll see what I can do though, and of course I'll run the nationwide database, such as it is. It's imperfect in my experience for these local filings, but we never know."

Pike nodded. "I'm spending Christmas in the southwest," he said. "Maybe not Christmas day itself, but a little seasonal trip."

"Well . . . that's somewhat surprising. Without your family, you mean?"

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking."

"Ah," she said. He'd told her at one point about his suspicions about his dad making it Mrs. Milburn. She'd reserved judgment, but he was comfortable telling her and it felt good to get it out.

"Hey, you want to come?" Pike said.

"I'll take that as a joke," Frankie said. "Though it's kind of you to include me."

"The main reason," Pike said, "is you have a late-model vehicle. I'm always nervous mine might break down."

"It could," Frankie said, a little playfulness there, slipping out of her librarian role for a moment.

Pike said, "And speaking of my beat-up truck . . . I was heading home Saturday night . . . I had a date that didn't end too well, so I was pre-occupied, and pretty dang tired, and going the speed limit . . . but I could have sworn I saw you going into a house on 7th Street . . . between Miller, and whatever the next one is, going south."

"Powell?" Frankie said.

"Was that you?" Pike said. "Or was it an optical illusion."

"Well, I can't imagine what I would have been doing over there," she said. "Was I alone?"

Pike took a good look at her. “You’re either innocent of all charges,” he said, “or you’re the best poker player around.”

“I hope you have fun in the southwest,” she said. “I believe you’re making a wise choice.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Allowing one’s mind to wander on the open road can be quite valuable . . . Meanwhile I’ll be holding down the fort here in the reference section.”

“See there you go,” Pike said. “I know there’s another side to you because you keep showing flashes.”

“Drive carefully,” she said.

Later on, Pike was in his room putting the final touches on his second-to-last term paper, and a text came in from Andrea asking him if he’d be jogging again tonight. He actually was considering it, looking forward to a little exercise, but this was getting way too confusing so he deleted her message and that was that.

Meanwhile, if you could believe it, who was downstairs currently with Hannamaker but Foxe.

They were jamming in The Box. Foxe had come in with a guitar and a little amp and it killed Pike to admit it but the idiot wasn’t bad. Hannamaker had been working the last couple evenings on repairing that side wall, and you had to give the guy credit for a) not involving Pike or bringing it up at all and b) for doing good work. When he finished the job, no way you could tell there’d been a strange gaping hole there 48 hours earlier.

Something that didn’t occur to Pike for a couple minutes, but how could you play guitar with your hand all bandaged up. He couldn’t resist going down there to have a look, and he hoisted himself up and straddled the wall and peered down at the action.

Sure enough, Foxe was doing his thing, holding a pick with the ends of his fingers that were sticking out of his cast thing and making it work. The two of them finished off part of a tune and took a break.

“What do you think?” Jack called up to Pike.

“Nah, I was just curious,” Pike said.

“You were bopping your head,” Jack said, “so you must have been digging it.” Foxe laughed, and started getting his equipment together, and Pike could see it was going to be an ordeal lugging it in and out of The Box, so rather than feel guilty he told Foxe to leave everything there if that made it easier.

Foxe nodded at Pike and said that would work. No big thank you, that would have been going too far, but at least no more punches were flying at the moment and Foxe managed to climb up and out of the The Box and took off.

When he was gone Pike said to Hannamaker, “That Andrea chick -- any idea what the story is there?”

Jack was as poker-faced as Frankie the librarian. “Dude, you keep bringing that up, and you’re asking the wrong guy. Your buddy Anthony should have a better a bead on it, last I checked.”

“Yeah, well . . . is he floating her boat, do you think?”

Jack took off his hat and started methodically pushing back his hair like he was deep in serious thought.

“To be honest with you, I’m trying to take care of my *own* boat . . . That girl over by the JC? Who you helped me out with? It’s on-again, off-again.”

“*You have got to be kidding me,*” Pike said.

“Why? What’s so bad about it?”

“Well when you put it like that . . . nothing at all, I guess. Other than you could get extremely messed up, but who cares?”

“Okay let’s don’t get carried away.”

“I mean besides *death*,” Pike said, “what could possibly go wrong?”

“There’s something about an older woman,” Jack said, looking off in the distance, shaking his head slightly. “Until you’ve experienced one it’s hard to relate . . . *Have you?*”

Pike was thinking, *yeah right pal*, you’re 18, she’s all of 20, 21. But no, unfortunately, he couldn’t say that he *had* dated an older woman, even a couple years older.

“Don’t worry about *me*,” Pike said. “But what’s so different about it, you want to risk Lou and the other guy again?”

“She moved,” Jack said, “she broke up with him, so they’re out of the picture . . . Answer your question, I can’t pinpoint it, but it’s there.”

“You . . . introduce her to The Box at all?” Might as well throw it out.

“No, no. It’s all on her terms. She calls the shots . . . Part of the appeal I guess.”

“Whatever,” Pike said. “Don’t do anything stupid when I’m gone, is all I ask.”

“What do you mean, *gone*?”

“I told you, I’m going to Arizona.”

“No you didn’t. You told me you were *thinking* about it . . . what’s so special down there?”

“I don’t think *anything* . . . It is what it is.”

Jack said, “People still send post cards when they go places? My grandma always did that.”

“I don’t know . . . why?” Pike said.

“If they do, send me one,” Jack said.

Chapter 19

When school let out Tuesday Pike couldn't take it anymore and he got in the truck and right away started off toward Uffington.

He didn't like the idea of leaving for a week or two and still not knowing for sure what happened to Henry's kid brother, Jeff.

He supposed you could google the guy and see if by any chance he was still in Monterey . . . but if he wasn't, then you'd start to worry and your mind could run away from you in a hurry, just like it had been with the apparent disappearance of the Milburns.

And if the dude did happen to be there, it would still be tough to know what to do. Did you just call him up and say *are you okay?*

That would be awkward and suspicious and you easily might not come away with a satisfying answer even then, and then you'd be left speculating worse than before.

So the idea now was to stop and see Henry, who at least would know and recognize him, and you could work your way up to it in casual conversation and then slip in the only important question.

First of course at the halfway mark was the hot dog stand with the Hawaiian theme and Pike pulled off and ate, and while he was at it he saw that Henry Geraghty was listed in the white pages, address and phone number, which was interesting because he *wasn't* listed that last time, when Pike was getting ready to go over there but ended up getting enough information from Frankie to do the job without needing to.

In spite of this little wrinkle, it was a good sign that Henry was still around, no big changes or anything, which meant you should be able to get to the bottom of this.

Or *was* that a good sign?

Maybe not, actually. If Jeff was fine all these years then maybe the two brothers started a business together or something, or stayed in San Francisco when their parents died and took over the house in the Marina district. Or a bunch of other possibilities.

Now Pike was starting to panic just a little and he bit the bullet and googled Jeff Geraghty, but like he feared, there were an awful lot of them, and here we go again trying to narrow people down.

What he really wanted to see, was there a Jeff Geraghty living in Uffington, which wouldn't have been a total surprise, as close as the brothers seemed to be.

He couldn't find any, and now since he'd opened a big can of worms he went ahead and checked the Monterey and Carmel area, and that came up empty.

Which didn't mean anything one way or the other, and he got back in the pickup, put the radio on loud so he wouldn't rattle his brain anymore with all the extreme scenarios, and would have made a beeline for Henry's house except he got stuck behind a hay truck for the last ten miles into Uffington.

It said that Henry lived on Commerce Way, which turned out to be a dead-end cul-de-sac where all the houses looked the same, except with some of the front doors reversed and a couple front lawns torn up and converted to those drought-resistant shrubs you see sometimes.

Pike didn't waste any time. He couldn't find a doorbell but there was a brass knocker that was surprisingly loud and soon a woman came around from the side of the house and asked if she could help him.

She looked good for a mom, in shape and tan, like she spent plenty of time outdoors doing physical stuff, which she seemed to be doing now, pulling off a pair of gardening gloves as she greeted him.

"Thank you," Pike said. "First of all, I was hoping I have the right address for Henry . . . and then, would he be available?"

"And your name is . . . ?" She said it friendly enough.

"Pike. He gave me a ride once. I live over in Beacon . . . I really appreciated it, he kind of bailed me out."

She smiled. "I'm Margie. I can see you're probably not looking for another ride, but why don't you come in. Henry gets home between 5:10 and 5:20."

Pike checked the time. It was close to 5, later than he thought, which was good, and he followed her inside, and there was a side room with a little TV and she said to make himself comfortable, that she had a bit more pruning to finish.

"You're pretty trusting," Pike said. "What if I was going to clean out the joint, or something?"

“We have to use our best judgment,” she said, playing along.

“But Henry . . . he always comes home in that little 10 minute window?”

“Oh yes, he’s very efficient, and and always dependable,” she said. “I suppose that’s one reason I married him.” She laughed, and went back outside. There was a nice spirit to the woman.

Henry walked in a few minutes later like clockwork. He was a little leaner than before, and had a goatee now. Pike stood up and re-introduced himself. Henry shook his hand, but there was a bewildered look to him.

“Don’t you remember?” Pike said, after the formalities were out of the way. “I got in a jam downtown that time, no wheels, and you picked me up in the Suburban? . . . You had kids in the back, girls, going to watch Bellemeade play Hamilton . . . That was the lucky thing for me, since I needed to get all the way back to Beacon.”

“I don’t have a Suburban,” Henry said, a little more cautiously than Pike would have liked.

“Okay, that part I probably have wrong,” Pike said, “that’s not important.” And it wasn’t, since vehicle changes in different realities were apparently common and kept happening.

Henry said, looking at him closely, “You twist my arm, I *do* know you . . . Can’t place *driving* you, but yeah, we met someplace.”

“That’s great then . . . And it was fun talking to you, and hearing your stories about growing up in Frisco, the Marina, going to Galileo High School, your brother, everything else.” Pike hoped throwing the brother in there would seem low-key, like he was only part of a list of a bunch of other stuff.

“What *about* my brother?” Henry said, everything about the guy stiffening up now.

“Nothing,” Pike said, scrambling to change it up, “just the whole nine yards, I enjoyed hearing it, in fact it reminded me of going up to your old neighborhood to get some autographs after the Giants won the first time.”

“You enjoyed . . . hearing *it*?”

“Huh?” Either this guy was off his rocker, or else had had a really bad day . . . or, the worst possibility, he was awfully sensitive about his brother. Whatever that might mean.

The wife, Margie, came back in and you could hear her washing her hands in the kitchen, and a minute later she handed Henry a cocktail in a short thick glass and asked Pike if he’d like a 7-Up.

Pike said thanks but no, and Henry said to Margie, “The kid. I believe he’s asking questions about Jeffie.”

Pike said, “I apologize then. I didn’t *mean* to be.”

Henry said, “You come into someone’s house . . . cold . . . You need to show more respect son.” Henry picked up the briefcase he had walked in with, and took it and his drink upstairs.

When the door up there clicked Margie said, “He’s having a rough time at work these days. But I’m not sure why you would need to bring up Jeff . . . Not that I’m at all sure what you’re *doing* here, actually.”

Pike was thinking, of all the various ideas he’d had recently, which definitely covered a lot of ground . . . *this might have been the worst.*

“I’m not sure either,” he said, trying to regain even a tiny bit of footing. “Your husband, he gave me that ride . . . then we met another time at the gas station, your daughter was playing a basketball game, and he said she didn’t like him watching so he was killing an hour-and-a-half . . . The way we left it off, he said look him up some time.”

“We have two daughters,” Margie said, more coldly now. “Neither one of them plays basketball.” She folded her arms. Pike took it as his final signal to get the hell out of there.

“Well,” he said, trying to keep it light, hoping she wasn’t about to call the police or something, “what I’m learning, you can’t always take things at face value, can you?”

That didn’t work apparently. “What’s your *name*, anyway?” she said.

“I told you. They call me PK sometimes, for short.”

“Your full name.”

“Pike Gillette . . . listen, I better be going.”

This Margie woman looked different suddenly. Kind of stunned. Something told Pike it wasn’t the *I better be going* part that got her.

“Why?” he said. “You *do* know me then?”

“Yes,” she said, continuing pretty darn unconvincingly, “you play football, right?”

“I *did*, yeah.”

She was recovering a bit, and she started to ramble all over the place.

“We watched you . . . I mean we didn’t physically go to your games . . . since we follow Bellemeade mostly, when we *do* go to one . . . but we kept an eye on your progress . . . you must be quite proud . . . And how silly of me not to have made that connection earlier, I mean there can’t be that many *Pikes* around, *can* there. ”

“Do you know my parents?” Pike said. He was starting to fear the worst.

“Hmm?”

“Alice and Bill? . . . Gillette?”

“That doesn’t ring a bell, no,” she said.

Pike said, “When you say *that* doesn’t ring a bell . . . The whole thing, or part of it, or what?”

“I’m sorry, I’m not following you.”

“Do you know my Dad?” he said.

Her answer was just a little quieter. “I don’t believe I do. Should I?”

“I’m not sure,” he said.

It hung there for a minute.

Pike said, “Just one more question, if you don’t mind. Where’s Jeff?”

“I’d like you to leave now,” Margie said.

Pike didn’t feel real good driving home. He felt like he’d been in a fight and had gotten sucker-punched, and then stomped on for good measure.

He remembered the library had late hours on Tuesday nights. His gut feeling was Frankie didn’t work those hours, but when he made it back into town he took a chance and stopped in.

There was another librarian at Frankie’s desk, an older woman, quite rotund, with an old-fashioned hair-do and wearing a lot of rouge.

“Is there something I can help you with,” she said, no warmth to it at all, but like a normal librarian.

Pike said, “I don’t suppose . . . Ms. Frankie is still around. Is she?” He was embarrassed that he didn’t even know her last name, or if she had ever told him, he forgot it.

“No,” the new woman said. “Would there be anything else?”

Pike said there wouldn’t be and left.

Now what?

You had one more day of school, one last paper he had to finish off tonight by midnight and submit online, which he wasn’t worried about, and then *Boom*, was he really going to Arizona?

There was suddenly a lot to digest.

Going back to the house right now wasn't high up on his priorities, and he cruised around for a while, and then remembered a winter pre-season basketball tournament they kept talking up at school so he went over there and took a seat in the stands behind one of the baskets, which kept him out of the student section where he didn't particularly feel like running into anyone tonight.

It looked like there were eight schools entered, and it was a double-elimination type deal, and Pike didn't really care who the schools were, but the game going on at the moment between two of them wasn't bad.

There was one kid out there who was definitely the star, and the other team tried to double and triple-team him when he got the ball, but he still scored pretty much at will. The kid was college material, maybe even big-time college material, who knows, and no one else on the court looked to be.

Pike couldn't help thinking some more about his own situation, since he was college material too, at least in some shape or form. He was still getting the recruiting letters, though the ones from the better schools all had the same kind of automated vibe to them.

He was curious what might shake out at Utah State, whether any of the guys on the bus and in the dorm on his recruiting trip would end up there. He still couldn't remember the guy's name who he got into the mix with in that bar episode, the quarterback from Texas, but the guy was at least colorful Pike decided, and it might fun to track him down and catch up.

He observed the student section for a while. A bunch of smiling kids at center court with plenty of school spirit, which he himself never had, and kind of regretted.

An abbreviated version of the football band was sprinkled into the mix, playing short riffs to try to energize everyone during time outs. It was kind of like a party, school getting out tomorrow for a couple weeks, no one worrying about much of anything.

And you had to envy them . . .

But for Pike there was a reality, *possibly several of them actually*, and plenty of business to take care of, and it was what it was.

He stuck out the first game . . . the team with the good kid actually lost, as it became clear that none of his teammates were any good and he couldn't quite do it all himself . . . and two more teams started warming up and Pike had about had enough and was getting ready to leave when his phone rang and it was Frankie.

He couldn't hear her against the noise in the gym so he asked if he could call her right back, and he hustled outside. It was chilly and you smell people's fireplace smoke, and Pike figured why not head over the field where it was wide open and quiet and plenty private, and he stood on the familiar emblem on the 50-yard line and called Frankie back, and as he did he noticed the letter **H** that he ripped down from what seemed like ages ago still hadn't been replaced.

He thought about the timeline for just a moment, and remembered it being the last Saturday in November that he went back a day and ripped it down, and what were we now . . . December 20th?

Holy Moly, that was only like a month ago? *Unbelievable.*

At any rate . . . Frankie was back on the line, coming in nice and clear this time.

"Boy," Pike said, "You're beyond the call of duty, I didn't require you to tag me."

"Not a problem," Frankie said. "Mrs. Engleworth said a young man came in looking quite concerned, and she thought I should know."

"Well in that case, if you *do* have a minute," Pike said, "there's one more thing now . . . Actually two more, but forget the second one."

"And that first thing is . . . ?"

"The guy up the Bay Area, who I thought I just straightened out . . . I may *not* have, is what I'm discovering."

"This was the fellow who had the accident?"

"Yeah. The guy you helped me with . . . What it is now, I think, he may not have had the accident, but something else may have happened . . . Which is kind of what I feared, that I was taking a chance dealing with it that simple."

"I see. Do you have any notion what may *have* happened, and when?"

"No. The bad part, the reason I stopped by your desk I guess, is I can't find the guy now."

"Okay, I shall do my best," Frankie said. "This was Jeffrey Geraghty, correct?"

"Yeah. Sorry to put more on your plate." Pike knew she was checking something else for him too, and couldn't place what it was for a just a second, and then remembered of course she was looking into whether it was on the record at all that the Milburns may have changed their name.

Jeez, how could you get mixed up on *that*?

Frankie said, "Well goodnight then . . . Unless your second issue is of significance."

Pike figured on some level he wanted to blurt it out, so he did. “Not a dealbreaker, so please don’t waste any time thinking about it or anything, on my behalf . . .”

“But?”

“Okay. I mentioned my suspicions about my dad . . . he was seeing someone . . . *She* leaves, she’s out of the picture, but now I think I filled in the blanks . . . Or they got filled in *for* me a couple hours ago.”

“I’m sorry Pike.”

“All right, so you know where I’m going with it then . . . This is the way it’s been working, not just with my dad, but *period*, when I try to change things . . . For example you’ll run into someone random, and you think it’s out of the blue, but you find out of all the houses in town they could be visiting, that they kind of chose your key one.”

“I’m with you,” Frankie said. “I may have mentioned that I believe our old friend Julian expressed similar non-coincidental engagements.”

“So there you have it . . . What else is on tap for you the next couple weeks? You do anything special for Christmas, typically?”

“Just myself and Mom,” Frankie said. “We tend to keep it basic.”

“No outside adventures then?” Which was none of his business obviously, but he couldn’t help flashing on the two couples getting out of that Mercedes.

“Not particularly, I’m quite the homebody,” she said.

Chapter 20

Pike sprung it on his parents Thursday morning that he was going to Arizona. That seemed like the best way, don't give them time to think about it and over-react.

His mom and dad were in the kitchen and his dad was running late, and his mom was hustling up Bo and Jackie because their school still had a half-day today, which was ridiculous, but it meant they'd all be out of here in a minute.

His mom normally did her routine at the fitness gym after she dropped them off, so if all went well, Pike would be on the road without having to deal with any collateral damage.

All he told his parents was, "I'm heading down south for a few days. There's a kid I met at football recruiting who lives down there." His parents seemed to listen, were okay with the general concept, and being preoccupied neither one asked any follow-up questions, much less seemed to realize that with today being the 22nd, 'a few days' meant he'd be gone for Christmas.

Not too much of what he told them was a lie, technically. Then after the *few days* was up, Pike would let them know that he was alive and well, and incidentally, would be extending his trip a bit.

It was around 9:30 and he had the truck packed up, which meant basically just a big duffel bag strapped down in back, and he'd checked the tires and the oil and was topping off the coolant when Hannamaker comes rolling up.

"Well now, look what the cat dragged in," Pike said. "Early enough for you . . . or what?"

It did seem a little early to be practicing some drums, and it crossed Pike's mind, given Jack's recent track record, that he might be here to socialize with someone in The Box, though that seemed unlikely as well, first thing on a Thursday morning.

Jack stood there and rubbed his lower lip for a minute. "I thought I might come with you," he said.

"Say *what?*"

“That is, if you have room . . . Unless you were planning to, like, meditate on the open road or something, and you didn’t want any company.”

One thing Pike for sure was not going to do was meditate, God knows he had enough of that, and with more to come most likely, which he really didn’t want to think about . . . but this was quite a twist, and frankly now that he’d convinced himself to go, he *was* kind of looking forward to hitting the open road on his own.

He said, “Well, what would you *do*, exactly? I mean I have someone I have to see, maybe a couple people . . . wouldn’t you just kinda be bored off your ass?”

“Probably,” Jack said. “The alternative though, *my* place during the holidays, it’s not always the smoothest.”

Pike could relate to this of course, and he felt a little bad for Jack, which he shouldn’t have, but he did, remembering when they picked up the drum set how the place had a dysfunctional feel to it, and with the step-brothers piled into the same little bedroom with him.

“In that case, it’d be good to have some company,” Pike lied, “if you really are serious.”

Jack appeared relieved, and genuinely happy. “Damn, dog,” he said, “if I ever bad-mouth you again, just smack me.” And he gave Pike a kind of a pat-on-the-back hug.

“That’s not funny.”

“What, the man-hug . . . or the bad-mouthing you part?”

“None of it,” Pike said. “But since I’m stuck with you, the sooner you throw your stuff in, the sooner we can beat it out of here and get on the gol-darn highway.”

“Which means stopping for something to eat,” Jack said.

“Yeah, well . . . I’m thinking Brayton, you got that truck stop, that’s around 20 miles. Think that’ll work?”

“Might be a little far,” Jack said.

“I know,” Pike said.

A couple hours into it, they were approaching Bakersfield.

Pike said, “Okay now, we got two options here. We can jump on 40, head to Phoenix that way, avoid all the LA traffic . . . or . . . we stay south on 5, get into some of the LA nonsense, though maybe not all of it if we’re lucky, and then veer off to Palm Springs.”

“What’s in Palm Springs?” Jack said.

“This *person*. It sort of occurred to me that was an option, but I wasn’t all that interested in seeing them, so I’ve been mostly dismissing the idea.”

“*Them?*”

“Her . . . Not what you’re thinking. This is a schoolteacher from Pocatello, Idaho.”

Jack was smiling, rolling it around. “Damn Gillette, you’re pretty slick . . . working a lot of angles, behind the scenes.”

“Okay, knock it off. The issue on the table, and we got about 5 miles to decide . . . which way?”

“I’ve never been to Palm Springs,” Jack said.

“Fine.”

“But what was the problem, before?”

“I don’t know. I’m kind of mad at this person. It’s a long story. Maybe with two of us there, it won’t get as serious.”

“What are you mad at her about?”

“Between you and me? . . . She killed a couple guys, and I’m pretty sure she’s going to jail this time.”

Jack reacted for a second like he’d received a shock from a 220 electric outlet, his head and arms jerking around, and Pike was glad *he* was doing the driving at the moment because otherwise the truck might have veered into the other lane.

Jack said, “I don’t know why . . . but the way you said it, matter of fact-like, I believe you’re actually serious.”

“I am.”

“Ho-ly Crap . . .”

“Okay don’t have a conniption fit,” Pike said. “This gal, she tends to gravitate toward the stalker types . . . I’m not kidding, not far off from what you got on TV and in the movies.”

Jack was still adjusting to Pike laying the first thing on him. “Wow,” he said. “You mean . . . so there’s like . . . built-in violence or something?”

“I don’t really get it. I stopped trying to figure it out, how you’d be attracted to someone like that. The woman seems reasonable, otherwise. You’ll see.”

“But . . . get outa here . . . she really wasted the dudes?”

“She did. The first one was self-defense it sounded like, and they cleared her. The second, a scumbag was hounding her, same type deal.”

“Except it may not have been self-defense this time.”

“Right. She’s doing some kind of house arrest at the moment. Trapped in Palm Springs.”

“Jeez Louise . . . She *shot* ‘em, or what?”

“Nah, it wasn’t like that. She knows some martial arts, I guess . . . and she’s very strong. Like, *un-naturally* strong.”

The open road was soothing, you tended to relax, and all the BS that was piling up from different directions didn’t seem quite as urgent right now, it was like it was pushed back a couple layers.

Pike was very tempted to tell Jack his secret. Maybe not *all* of it, no need to get into the time travel business probably, but it would sure be nice to tell a friend what happened in the Bellemead game that night . . . especially since Jack was on the very same *field* at the time.

And as unlikely as it would have seemed, considering their past history, Hannamaker *was* becoming his friend. And Pike had come to grips with the fact that he didn’t have too many of those, that for whatever reason he could rub people the wrong way, especially kids his age, and if he looked in the mirror this may be why he angled toward the Frankies and Mitches, and he supposed the Danis of the world too.

You could tell Jack, get the whole shebang off your chest, and while you’re at it tell him about Dani as well, she most likely wouldn’t care, especially at the moment, given her circumstances.

Jack would be skeptical at first, and then he’d maybe wrestle with it, and then you’d have to do something physical to prove your point, and you would have opened up his world and now you’d have an ally who understands you.

All good . . . but of course you *couldn’t* tell Jack. Look what happened with Cathy, not just the her-breaking-up-with-him part, but the altering of her life in a sense, the turning her upside as far as the laws of the world. Luckily one of the re-sets straightened that out, but still . . . And look at the final outcome, she has to end up with Foxe.

So Pike kept his mouth shut and left it out there that Dani was real strong and a martial artist too, which Pike was pretty sure she wasn’t but that helped explain her doing a couple guys without using a weapon . . . though the details of the one guy ending up in the wall might raise a question for Jack, so no need to include those.

But of course Jack asked right away, “Wait a second . . . she knocked off two guys with her *hands*? How big is she?”

Pike said, “Not that big, but don’t worry about it . . . and do me a favor, if we *do* see this person, which is not a lock, since she doesn’t know anything about us showing up . . . don’t be asking her questions like that. Just chalk it up as an adrenaline thing.”

“A *couple* of adrenaline things, it sounds like,” Jack said. “But okay, I got ya. I think.”

They rode in silence for a while. Pike figured it was more just the hum of the highway conditioning you to think about stuff, than it was the Dani revelations, though that part was hanging there too, obviously.

They’d been seeing road signs on billboards for a while, the place kind hitting you over the head with it actually, starting to get a little obnoxious, for *Sam’s Cider Town*. Pike didn’t like hard liquor if that’s what it was, and he wasn’t about to try to sample something while he was driving anyway, and if it was regular apple cider he wasn’t a big a fan of that either.

But they were using little cartoons to advertise other elements of *Sam’s Cider Town*, including a gift shop and a bakery with large wedges of cream pie, so it seemed worth a stop.

It wasn’t bad. Pretty touristy of course but they had an old western town set up, and if you hung around long enough they had hourly gun battle showdowns in front of the fake saloon, and Pike thought that would be a fun summer job, to be one of those cowboy actors, though part of the deal was one of them falls off a roof when he gets shot and lands on something soft about 10 feet below, but still.

They never did see anyone drinking cider of any type, but it was fun, you roamed around and there was a lot to look at and Hannamaker treated Pike to a barbequed brisket sandwich and they sat outside and ate at a picnic table beside a fake corral.

“Well I tell ya,” Pike said, “you keep paying for stuff, I won’t even regret bringing you along.”

Jack said, “Thanks. I’ll take that as a positive . . . You have to admit, this thing’s pretty good.”

“*Really* good. And just to warn you, this might be the highlight meal of the trip.” Which could be true. He was trying to picture the food in Palm Springs and Anthem, Arizona.

Jack kept chewing, and when he finished his mouthful, which was a large one, he washed it down with a sip of root beer, and then wiped everything with the napkin and kind of cleared his throat.

“Okay now dog,” he said. “This has been bugging me for a while . . . And you’ll see, it’s not a big deal at all, really.”

“Uh-oh,” Pike said.

“Nah, see, you’re reading me wrong already . . . the thing of it is, I’m seeing you’re a good guy. I didn’t use to think so, especially, but now I do.”

“Don’t stop there.”

“I’m not saying you’re a close buddy or anything . . . let’s not go that far . . .”

“But?”

“But I’m comfortable around you . . . Dude, that perfume and all that? That was me in there those times in The Box . . . with Jocelyn.”

“*What?*” Pike said.

“Now take it easy. I mean you were on the outs, it was obvious. Everyone *knew* it. It seemed harmless enough, when you put it in perspective.”

“I *am* taking it easy,” Pike said. What was really going on, he was seeing Hannamaker like he wasn’t quite real right now, like when you traveled and ran into someone you knew, but something was slightly off and the lines were blurred.

Jack said, “At any rate . . . I wanted to let you know. Thanks for being a good sport. I feel better now, I really do . . . And just to add, nothing came of it, as you can see. It fizzled out pretty quick.”

“Glad to hear it,” Pike said, and he went back to his barbequed brisket sandwich.

Which may have been the best tasting thing in 5 counties but now tasted the way he remembered a communion wafer tasting, which was like plastic with bread crumbs attached.

Jack kept talking, unfortunately. “I mean if it helps any additional,” he said, “it was all me, instigating it. She had nothing to do with that part.”

Even though it was torture, Pike said, “Don’t worry about it . . . It’s all good.”

“Man, you don’t know how nice it is to hear you say that. Which is what I was hoping would be your reaction. I mean technically you weren’t broke up yet, but what was the difference, really, it was just *like* you were already . . . Capiche?” Jack stuck out his hand.

“What does that word mean, *capiche*?” Pike said, absentmindedly shaking hands.

“Beats me, but you’ve never heard it? . . . I’m thinking it means are we on the same page here.”

“Unh.”

“Like I said, this business . . . it’s been weighing on me . . . I was of a mind to keep it to myself, let it die peaceful. But I’m glad I did the right thing.”

Pike was thinking: You did the *wrong* thing, pal. You *should* have let it die peaceful.

Jack said, “Okay. Now that we cleared the air *there* . . . What kind of pie do you want? It’s a hundred percent on me.”

“Well,” Pike said, “I guess you can make mine a sour cream rasin then.”

“I don’t know, they listed ‘em all inside, not sure I saw that one though.”

“Oh yeah they have it, I saw someone eating one . . . You must just have to wait a minute and ask them to bring it out special from in back.”

“If you *say* so,” Jack said, and he got up and disappeared into the little bakery wing of *Sam’s Cider Town*, which was across from the fake jail in the western village.

Pike got up too, and went the other way, back through the gift shop and out into the parking lot and into the truck, and he followed all the other doofuses who’d had enough of *Sam’s Cider Town* for now and were turning right and looping back under the freeway and then getting back on it, in the general direction of Palm Springs, and that’s what he did too.

Chapter 21

“Gosh,” Dani said, taking off her sunglasses and laying down the paperback she was reading.

“Yeah, well . . . you never know,” Pike said.

She said, “Of the variety of ways that today could have gone . . .”

“This wouldn’t be on the list?”

“It most certainly *would* not . . . I’m somewhat shocked, honestly.”

“Don’t be. What I tried first, was asking for your room number. It sounds like they don’t give that stuff out anymore, so I had to think hard for about two seconds and realize you might be at the pool.”

“Please don’t get me wrong Pike, it’s good to see you. But what are you *doing* here?”

“It’s nice to see you too,” he said, “especially after a kind of tough drive that took most of the day . . . You *think* you got the traffic beat, but then there’s always something. The worst part, when you finally start moving again, you can’t even figure out why you were stopped. I mean at least *give* me something, a fender-bender, whatever . . . When there’s nothing to point to, that’s even *more* frustrating.”

“You’re rambling,” she said. “But what’s the real story?”

“Well I was heading to Arizona. Someone suggested sort of spur of the moment that I combine it with a stop in Palm Springs . . . Looks like you’re kinda hot, don’t mind me, you want to take a dip.”

“I was *about* to, actually,” she said. “What I’ve learned pretty quickly, is even in December you have about a twenty minute window before it’s time to cool off.”

“The good thing too,” Pike said, as she got up from the lounge chair, “you’re comfortable in a bikini. That’s always the best choice for swimming.”

Dani ignored him and dove in. It was an old-fashioned squared-off pool with a 12 foot deep end and enough room to swim some legitimate laps, and Dani swam for a while.

Pike looked around to see if any new-looking male friends of hers might be sitting poolside as well and wondering what the hell he was doing, but it didn’t seem like there were.

She got out, and he figured he better be a gentleman and he scrambled to hand her a towel, and she said, “Just so I have it clear--you’re passing *through* Palm Springs, or you’re planning on staying here . . . I mean tonight.”

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“Because if you’re worried about that . . . to put you at ease, you’re welcome to sleep on my floor. I have some extra quilts, so you can soften things up a bit, it shouldn’t be too bad.”

“Gee . . . you sure? The neighbors, or the hotel people, they won’t think anything funny, some random younger guy emerging in the morning?”

“You know what? I’m not too worried about what people are thinking these days, truth be told.” She said it like she meant it, and Pike said in that case he’d take her up on it.

Dani said, “Fine, so we’ve established that. Now, let me think, where should we get a bite to eat . . . you’ll have to excuse me but I need a stiff drink every night with dinner, I’ve discovered . . . It helps me avoid pondering my fate. Nights tend to be the worst.”

Pike didn’t like her getting all introspective on him, so he said, “You wouldn’t have expected it, but there was a pretty good sandwich joint on the way down here. Barbeque. You could start smelling it from the exit ramp.”

Dani was still thinking. “We could try *Tania’s*. It’s walking distance. Give me a minute to get changed.” Pike took a seat at one of the round glass patio tables and checked his messages. There were a few that weren’t important, and then one from Mitch, asking if he had an estimated time of arrival.

Nothing from Hannamaker, which he didn’t really expect, but it was good not to see one announcing he’d been kidnapped or something.

As for Mitch, now that he was here in Palm Springs, who knows, maybe there wouldn’t be an ETA. The thought of sharing a room with the guy--in order to meet this Lucy lady--Pike wasn’t entirely sure about that one. Especially when by contrast you’re about to have dinner with a beautiful woman, even though, *okay*, she did do in those two guys.

Tania’s was a simple place with a comfortable vibe, and Dani got her stiff drink and by the end of the meal had loosened up a bit and was telling a few stories and laughing.

Pike chimed in about the Palm Springs *House Hunters* episode he’d seen. He said, “I’m watching it, and I’m thinking two things. What would *my* life be like if I lived there . . . I mean totally hypothetically . . . And also obviously, what’s *your* life like there *now*?”

“You’re saying it gave you the feeling for that?”

“Well it felt like it, the basic day-to-day atmosphere, yeah.”

“The house-arrest part included?”

“Sorry. That came out pretty lame.”

“That’s fine. And I *do* know what you’re getting at, with that show, it *can* convey the spirit of a place . . . I actually saw that same one as well, that you’re referring to.”

“I liked the couple. The pilot was a pretty cool dude. Knew what he was doing, definitely made the right choice.”

“Are you kidding? They needed to take the mid-century modern. That was a complete no-brainer.”

“Why? The one they got was turn-key perfect. They could rent it right out if they wanted, which was part of their plan.”

“Pike, those mid-century moderns come up once in a blue moon. They’re special. They have a Frank Lloyd Wright influence, among other things.”

“Okay . . . don’t get so excited, sheez.”

They ordered coffee and she remembered something.

“Let’s go backwards a minute,” she said. “The spur of the moment decision to detour here . . . you say someone *suggested* it?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Someone you met while getting gas, or what?”

Oh boy. “Nah, a friend of mine I happened to be talking to.”

“On the phone? They knew about me, then?”

“Not exactly . . . I told them I had a friend in Palm Springs, and I had a decision coming up at this interchange, should I take 5 or 40 . . . What’s the big deal?”

“This was your friend from Arizona?”

“No, the Arizona person is the old guy, Mitch . . . In fact you know all about Mitch.”

“The gentleman from Manhattan Beach,” Dani said, and Pike was relieved to be going in a different direction now. He could fill her in on some of Mitch’s developments, which he really didn’t like getting into, but at least they’d shifted the conversation from her inquiring about Hannamaker.

She said, “A friend from back home then?” *Or maybe not.*

“You got it,” Pike said. “But getting back to Mitch, you know he narrowed it down . . . at least *he* thinks he did . . . to a silver mine, right?”

“No. You haven’t told me that.” Dani was very still suddenly.

Pike was thinking back and he realized he *hadn't* told her. He remembered one conversation where he was about to drop it on her, but decided against it since at that point he didn't believe it himself, and why jam up Dani with confusing information.

Then soon enough the Chuck stuff happened, and it wasn't a priority any more.

"Okay here we go then," Pike said. "You can take the whole shebang with a grain of salt . . . I'm on the fence here myself . . . What it is, there's one of those open-air mines in New Mexico? I don't know if it's a big-pit type-thing or what, but it was closed for years and then they restarted it not that long ago."

Dani asked for a refill on the coffee.

Pike continued. "Mitch's theory--and I do have to give him some credit for researching it--is that particular mine supplies at least one lab that makes the amalgam that some dentists use."

"So it's not a theory then," Dani said. "It's either a fact or it's not."

"However you want to put it," Pike said. "Bottom line, he says this mine supplied the lab where my filling came from . . . And don't forget, silver is just a small piece of what goes into those fillings. There's a lot of other junk, which was kind of surprising to find out."

"And the mine supplying the lab is significant, how?"

"Well . . . and again, however you want to interpret it . . . Mitch thinks a UFO . . . how would you say . . . *disturbed* that mine. Back in 1956."

"A spaceship?"

"I guess, yeah."

"Meaning . . . a trace material . . . from outer space . . . may have found its way into . . . your teeth?"

"See how silly that sounds? . . . But yeah, that's kind of where Mitch is at."

No one spoke for a while.

"Do you want to go?" Pike said.

"Let's run through it again," Dani said. "That lab that your friend found . . . could they have supplied dental offices in Idaho too?"

Pike said, "I don't think Mitch knows that yet. But I'm not going to lie to you, that could be the way it went down . . . I mean, *if* we believe in this whole fairy tale."

"So you're saying . . . my friend's husband in New York, the police officer as well?"

Pike nodded. "There've been a handful Mitch has run across on account of his website, where people report paranormal stuff. Same basic scenario as us . . . My girlfriend back then,

Cathy, she came across one too, an army guy . . . There's also that dude in Texas, who I think I *did* tell you about, leaving out the details of the silver mine."

"The one who removed his filling."

"Yeah. Where it didn't turn out good for him after that." Pike didn't see any reason to add the part about the filling then disappearing under suspicious circumstances, when Mitch was trying to have it analyzed, since Dani currently had enough of her own criminal scenario to worry about.

Her face was scrunched up, and she was trying to make sense of something.

"What?" Pike said.

"Okay let's say for now, for crazy argument's sake, I buy into this . . . And let's say that same lab supplies multiple dental offices, and to take it a step further, let's say *several* labs around the country might receive silver material from that same mine . . ."

"Then why aren't more people affected," Pike said.

"Exactly . . . I mean we know these metal fillings aren't common anymore, like they might have been during our parents' generation . . . what with the concern about the safety of mercury and all . . ."

"But the numbers," Pike said.

"Yes, they don't add up. They should be explosive."

"Don't forget, Mitch is only one guy, with an unsophisticated database. There have to be plenty of others we don't know about . . . Look, I found *you* in the *newspaper*."

"But not *enough* others," she said.

"No."

"Is that what you were getting at, that time . . . when you asked if I was left-handed?"

"Something else I didn't ask you in addition," he said. "Your blood type. I'm pretty sure I know the answer."

"Well that's certainly not something I'm asked to dredge up every day, so I'm not quite certain. Though AB-negative rings a bell."

"Yeah, the rarest one. Me too. . . . So if that's the case maybe we can narrow it down to lefties who are AB-negative, who ended up with tainted silver in their teeth, from one source . . . Right?"

Dani said, "I don't know . . . Something tells me that still leaves too many potential individuals."

"What I'm thinking too . . . You got some other factor, like were you a twin?"

“No. *You* were?”

“Not me, no,” Pike said.

“Then why did you ask me?”

“No good reason . . . I don’t even like bringing this up, but any other weird genetic stuff in your family? Or how about . . . I don’t know . . . any crazy reactions to vaccinations? I sort of had one of those, my arm swelled up bad for a week.”

“Not that I know of,” she said, “though there is one thing along those lines, which I doubt means anything . . . When I was 7 or 8 I had what I was told was a somewhat rare childhood illness. Scarlet fever.”

“I had that too,” Pike said.

Chapter 22

The restaurant was on a side street not too far from the heart of downtown, so after dinner they checked out the main drag, which was pretty darn dead by then, and started back to the motel. It was balmy, you didn't feel like going inside, and you could smell flowers that seemed like they got stronger once the sun went down, though Pike had no idea what kind they were.

"I must say," Dani said, "my head is spinning. That was quite a revealing moment tonight."

"Nah no big deal," Pike said. "Mitch has been throwing this stuff at me for a while, and I've been fending it off."

"Well for *me* . . . it at least feels good to have *something* to hang on to. It's not easy being entirely in the dark for the last year and a half."

This got Pike feeling guilty for not filling her in sooner, but what could you do about that now.

He said, "I get what you're saying, as far as it goes. So we're at least not totally dangling out there on an island, no explanation in sight. Whether we believe it or not."

"Exactly . . . And I won't expect you to admit it, but you must be proud of me for placing the scarlet fever component in the mix."

"You didn't do that. I prompted you with my questions."

"Have it your way . . . I *am* glad you came today, though." She took his arm. Not the way someone *really* takes your arm, but how a cousin, or an aunt or maybe even your mom might do it, but it wasn't the worst thing.

A couple blocks from the motel Pike said, "So do you believe in UFO's? . . . Or what?"

"I think I do. I just have trouble rationalizing how they could be visiting us."

"The distance, you mean?"

"Yes. When you consider how far away the nearest star is that might support life. My sense is, it would take thousands of years to reach us."

"I agree. Unless they've found a different way to travel."

“I’d need more information, then,” she said.

Pike said, “My Arizona gig, I’m supposed to be meeting someone who saw one . . . In fact *the* one. Back in 1956 . . . For what it’s worth.”

“Well you’ll have to excuse me for being skeptical,” she said. “Of course, I would have been skeptical as well . . . that *I* could have . . . performed some of the things I have.”

“That makes two of us,” Pike said.

Dani said, “Jumping sideways for a moment though . . . I’m still not clear on *who* suggested you come and see me.”

Ah man. After all that, she comes back to it. And she’s not going to let up, is she.

“Okey-dokey. *Jeez*. You keep pressing me, the fact of the matter is, I started off this morning with another guy, sort of a buddy. We had an argument . . . and so we split it up. These things happen. You move on.”

Dani said, “I’m sorry to hear that. Where did you split up?”

“I don’t know, one of the stops we made. We decided it wasn’t working out, is all . . . That okay with *you*?”

“Well, is he all *right*? He had a means of transportation, at that point?”

“Pretty sure he did, yeah.”

Dani let go of his arm and stopped walking. “Pike I don’t like the sound of this. You need to check in with your friend.”

“Okay, I will a little later. He’s fine, but I’ll make sure, just because you’re worried about it.”

“Now.”

Pike had backed himself into a corner, but he had no choice at this point. Why had he mentioned Hannamaker in the first place, when she asked him by the pool how *him* just happening to drop in on *her* came about?

He couldn’t control his big mouth obviously. Why did you have to embellish stuff? Those legal shows like Law Order, they were always emphasizing that when you get to court, or get interrogated period, you don’t volunteer extra information.

What was wrong with *I* decided spur of the moment, or even, *it’s none of your business*, though that would be a little extreme, but still.

Pike took a deep breath and called Jack, who answered right away.

“Bud,” Pike said, “I’m not apologizing or anything, and believe me I’ll sleep fine either way . . . but only so *Dani* here can sleep good, I’m checking on you.”

“Appreciate it,” Jack said. “I’m okay.”

Pike covered the phone and said to Dani, “He says he’s a-okay.”

“He’s back in your town then,” Dani said, “with his parents?”

Oh my God. “She wants to make sure you’re back in Beacon,” Pike said to Jack.

“Actually, no. That place we got the sandwiches? Turns out they have a 24-hour coffee shop. It does the job, I’m at the counter . . . Then in the morning I’ll figure it out. There’ll be a lot of options.”

Pike said to Dani, “He’s squared away for tonight, and he’ll be home in the morning.

Dani said, “Is that so. And where is he *squared away*, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Pike hesitated and Dani asked if he’d hand her the phone please.

With the outskirts of Palm Springs in the rear view mirror, Pike said, “This wasn’t how I drew it up. You see things differently, obviously.”

Dani said, “Pike, you can’t do that to someone. I don’t care *what* transpired between you.”

“That’s what I would have thought too . . . But the funny thing was, it felt *good*. Rewarding, in fact.”

“Well perhaps you’re not as good-hearted a person as I thought you were.”

“You got that right, not at all . . . but one other thing here, didn’t you tell me something about not being able to leave Palm Springs? . . . As in a little matter of the police?”

Pike was suddenly wondering, *no joke*, was he currently *aiding and abetting a fugitive*, or whatever the expression was?

Dani said, “We should be fine.”

“Jesus Christ,” Pike said.

“Please relax, I have a routine, and I abide by it.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“It means . . . I’m required to check in twice a day, by calling a special number. 9 in the morning and 9 at night, with a half hour grace period. Which I just did before we left.”

“Wow . . . they don’t monitor your phone location or anything, in addition?”

“I left it in the room, just in case.”

“Oh my *God* . . . And you’re lecturing *me* about doing the right thing, and dropping a kid off?”

“We’re fine,” Dani said, “and your *friend’s* going to be fine, and *you* will be too.”

“Meaning we feel so much better when we do the *right thing* in life.”

“Totally.”

“Unreal . . .” Pike said. “You’re a beautiful woman, don’t get me wrong on that, but you’re a piece of work.”

“That’s sweet of you,” she said, “but . . . please keep your eyes on the road and let’s fulfill our objective with as few distractions as possible . . . And incidentally, your friend, does he know about my situation?”

“Which one?” which was a darn good question, and Dani wasn’t sure either.

Pike said, “The early part of the ride, where we were getting along, I shot him the basics of your current incarceration . . . Nothing about the Supergirl aspect.”

“That was sensible of you,” she said.

Hannamaker didn’t look too great standing there waiting, and Pike was glad about that. He also had Jack’s suitcase in the back of the pick-up all this time, so that probably caused him some extra inconvenience too, which was good.

“Hey,” Jack said, not making eye-contact with Pike.

Pike didn’t say a word so Dani stepped up and offered her hand. “I’m Pike’s friend,” she said. “Are you hungry, thirsty . . . or is there anything we can do for you?”

“Jiminy Christmas,” Pike couldn’t help butting in with. “You’re treating him like we just discovered him laying in the desert, his rear end all stuck with cactus pricks.”

“You didn’t have to come out all this way on my account,” Jack said. “And there’s a bus station I found in Emarrville, they go to Beacon it turns out, not Greyhound but that other line.”

“That’s good then, how far *is* that?” Pike said.

“It’s not an option,” Dani said.

“Why not?” Pike said. “What time’s the bus leave?”

“Not till tomorrow,” Jack said. “But early enough. They got a 6:18, I think it was.”

“So . . . we drop you, you don’t mind relaxing there for a few hours, the station, and then jumping on the bus?”

“No, that’d be fine,” Jack said.

“Get in please,” Dani said, “and that *won’t* be fine.”

Pike didn't *want* to get back in. He said, "You're saying . . . I gotta look at this piece of garbage, all the way back to Palm Springs?"

"Indeed," Dani said. "And overnight as well . . . After that you're on your own, if you girls want to continue your cat fight."

"Was that supposed to be a joke?" Pike said.

"I thought it was pretty funny, actually," Jack said.

Pike decided you could only fight a losing battle so long, and he got back in the truck and waited for them to get in too, and to sort out the seating arrangement. He had one of those simple three-seat bench jobs, that was it, no back seats, and first Jack got in the middle next to Pike and that was ridiculous, so they switched it around which was still tight but at least he had Dani next to him for the ride back, though that wouldn't be nearly enough consolation.

They got back on the highway and Dani seemed a bit agitated. "You keep looking at your watch," Pike said.

"I was kind of noticing that too," Jack said. "Is everything all right?"

"You know what?" Pike said. "Your job is to keep your mouth shut, and let *me* do any noticing that might be necessary."

"Please, boys," Dani said.

Since they were kind of into it now, and since he was irritated at Dani too for making him do this, Pike couldn't help adding on, "She's afraid she's under surveillance, and we better not screw around getting back."

"Is that really *true*?" Jack said.

"Either that, or she's having serious withdrawal issues from her phone."

"You lost it?" Jack said.

"Left it," Pike said. "In case they check on her, she claims."

"I guess that *is* a good way to keep tabs on someone," Jack said.

"Dude, how many ways can I say it--nobody's asking your opinion."

Dani spoke up. "I am a bit concerned about something," she said. "It didn't come to me until a few minutes ago, but they do physical inspections twice a month."

Pike raised an eyebrow at that one, and Jack did too, and they didn't exactly look at each other but they were on the same page.

"Okay, you need to stop taking things out of context," Dani said. "The inspections are supposed to be random, but I'm remembering the last one was on a Thursday night."

“Two weeks ago?” Pike said.

“I’m pretty sure it was. Though frankly this whole bad dream, it’s been somewhat of a blur.”

Pike said, “Even if it was, what are the odds of someone showing up tonight? Wouldn’t the idea be to keep you off balance?”

“One would think,” Dani said. “Except this gentleman--he was very courteous actually and seemed like a real straight shooter, and he wore a coat and tie--when he left last time he said *take care and I’ll see you in two weeks.*”

“They’re all about full disclosure, more and more,” Jack said.

“What would *you* know about it?” Pike said.

“Well we did a criminology segment in Mr. Hart’s Civics? That’s what they were stressing, kind of like with the drunk driving checkpoints, lot of times they announce them up front, where and when you’re going to have to watch for ‘em.”

“That would fit this situation I think,” Dani said. “I don’t believe the man was being cagey in the least, that he was simply alerting me that he’d see me in two weeks.”

“Well what *time* was all that?” Pike said.

“Pretty late. I remember I was watching the news when he knocked. The news comes on early in Palm Springs, at 9:30 if you can believe it, because of all the retired people. But then they repeat it after Jimmy Kimmel and all of them . . . I’d say it was around 2.”

Pike said, “Wow you’re not kidding. Very considerate of this person to time it like that. What if you were in the middle of something?”

“You’re not allowed to be,” Dani said.

Jack said, “What do we got, from here?”

“About an hour and a half,” Pike said.

“Gonna be tight then,” Jack said. “Do you live in an apartment, a hotel, what?”

“A motel.”

“A little more than that,” Pike said. “They call it a motel, but it’s a definite notch up. More like a semi-resort.”

“Is there a 24-hour front desk then?” Jack said.

“Uh-huh,” Dani said. “I’m sensing where you might be going with this, but I’m not seeing it.”

Jack said, “So you call ‘em up, tell the desk people you’re expecting someone, and you’ll be back shortly.”

“And if the person shows up early, to please have them wait in the lobby,” Pike said. “That’s not bad actually.”

“What would *that* accomplish?” Dani said. “I’m not where I’m supposed to be, I just violated the conditions of my bail, and they’ll likely re-admit me . . . I apologize Jack, I’m not sure how much Pike has told you, concerning my . . . unlikely predicament.”

“Not a problem,” Jack said. “But to answer your question, by calling it in, you’re demonstrating responsibility. That should help.”

“A pre-emptive strike,” Pike said. “In fact, if the guy *does* happen to show, and you *are* late . . . and none of this may happen but if it did . . . just tell him you needed some fresh air.” Pike couldn’t help thinking of the resort guest who apparently *had* needed some fresh air and stumbled upon the scene in the hot tub with Dani and Chuck . . . but that wasn’t relevant at the moment.

“So . . . just like that,” Dani said.

“Pretty much,” Jack said. “Your dinner wasn’t agreeing with you, and you felt better being out . . . Anyhow--at least call it in, get it on the record.”

Dani smiled and kind of shrugged her shoulders and Jack gave her his phone and she took care of it. “I must say, you kids are clever,” she said.

“Kids,” Pike said.

“Yeah, what’s up with that,” Jack said.

Dani said, “And Jack I’m glad to meet you, and glad these kind of . . . backhanded circumstances developed.”

“What does *that* mean?” Pike said.

“That things happen for a reason . . . Pike let’s face it, you and I wouldn’t have come up with such a clever plan, I don’t think, without Jack’s input . . . At least I can relax the rest of the way now, and what will be will be, I guess.”

“And I admire your spirit,” Jack said.

Pike didn’t like this at all, and didn’t say anything back to either one of them . . . and couldn’t she see right through this idiot, *that her spirit was not all he was in the process of admiring?* Pike hunched forward a bit and clenched his teeth and focused on the road.

Meanwhile Dani had shifted to the right, and was asking Jack steady questions, and Jack was animated and happy to answer them all, and every so often there would be a pause and they’d both laugh about something.

This continued for a good twenty miles, and by that point they were like two long-lost friends, and Pike couldn't handle it any more.

So he said, "Yo, hello? . . . I'm sorry to interrupt the party you got going on, but Dani, I have some questions about Chuck."

"Who's Chuck?" Jack said.

"Okay now you have to pipe down," Pike said. "You've been revved up for a while, more than a little out of control. Now you need to get back into your place."

"My, how rude," Dani said.

"So let's start with the basics," Pike said. "Where is . . . *was* . . . this guy from?"

"What's gotten into you?" she said.

"*Nothing's* gotten into me, except for I'm trying to help you out here. You need to work with me."

Thinking: You don't know it yet girl, but I'm *really* trying to help you out here.

Jack said, "I don't mean to be rude *myself*, but I take it Chuck's the one you wasted, then." Saying it as obnoxiously casual as 'he's the guy you played racquetball with'.

"Okay," Dani said, "you're *both* starting to get on my nerves . . . Can we please have silence the rest of the way?"

"We absolutely can," Pike said. He looked over at Jack. "See what you did?" he said. "With you, less is definitely more."

"I'll remember that," Jack said.

"No you won't," Pike said.

Chapter 23

Dani thought the best idea was she'd go in first, and check with the desk people in the lobby.

The thought was if the inspector dude *was* hanging around, or had shown up and was coming back shortly, that Pike and Jack would wait a few minutes and then go hang out by the pool until Dani gave them the okay.

This would be better than the three of them tromping into the room together, on the admittedly off-chance, but still a chance, that the guy was waiting outside the room, or who knows, maybe even had a key and was waiting *in* it.

The problem was, a long time went by and Dani didn't show up at the pool, and meanwhile Pike was stuck with Hannamaker, the last guy he wanted to be looking at tonight.

Meaning the day, that shaped up with so much promise actually, when he dumped the two-timing son-of-a-bitch . . . had backfired royally.

It had to be past two now and people were still swimming. There was a sign so big you could hit your head on it, announcing that the pool closed at 10pm, but apparently that didn't matter.

There was a couple hanging onto the wall together in the deep end, looking lovey-dovey out there, and Pike felt a little funny watching them, but he couldn't help it, and it beat talking to Jack, and Pike wondered did Dani ever hang out in the pool at night with anyone these days.

She'd mentioned that new guy, that she knew from the resort bar, but there was no sign or mention of him, so hopefully that ran its course, but her dangerous pattern of picking guys wasn't going to go away, and Pike was pretty sure that even him going back and dealing with Chuck wouldn't make it go away either.

But at least, just maybe, he could get her out of this jam, and give her a fighting chance.

Without being a lawyer or knowing anything about the case, it didn't look real promising, *did it?*

You had two problems, maybe three.

First you had a witness who evidently thought he saw Dani hold the idiot under water, that's number one. That might not be a deal-breaker in and of itself, a petite gal like Dani pulling off something as unlikely as that . . . except you had the Pocatello detectives sticking their nose in, which was problem number two.

They couldn't quite figure it out up there, but they were thinking she'd already got away with homicide number one, on their watch, plus they'd witnessed her strength part in action.

Pike was pretty sure, again from watching re-runs of Law and Order, that the Palm Springs prosecutors couldn't introduce what may or may not have happened in Pocatello.

But he was pretty sure the cops and DA's had a way of letting the jury know anyway.

Three would be if the autopsy came up that Chuck's heart was fine, that it should have been ticking like a million bucks. Then Dani's story about him stopping his run because he was getting palpitations, which she then tied into him collapsing in the hot tub, might not hold up.

Then too, you had the guy stalking her, which would no doubt be corroborated, and in this case it would hurt Dani rather than help her, because now she had a motive. And unlike up in Idaho, she didn't claim this one was self-defense.

It wasn't a slam dunk, so to speak, but you put it all together Pike was pretty sure she was going to prison.

Maybe not Murder One, but some level of homicide serious enough to send her away.

He'd gone through it before in his head, and couldn't remember why for a minute, that he'd concluded that going back pre-Chuck and messing with the tourist witness from Minnesota wouldn't fly . . . Then he remembered his reasoning, that that wouldn't do anything to stop Dani from drowning Chuck, and maybe someone *new* from witnessing it.

What it was coming down to, which you couldn't avoid, you'd have to deal with the source direct . . . Which was part of why he was quizzing Dani in the truck about the Chuck details. The other reason obviously was to interrupt the Hannamaker-Dani vibe that was developing, but either way he didn't get too far.

It took forever, and there weren't any swimmers in the pool anymore and Pike and Jack both were dozing off when Dani finally came and got them.

"We're good then?" Pike said, as they headed to her room.

“I’m a bit irritated, to be quite frank,” Dani said. “What I was afraid might happen actually did . . . Arnold *was* here earlier--I told you he struck me as quite routine-oriented--and thanks to Jack’s idea he was conveyed the message that I’d return shortly.”

“*Arnold?*” Jack said.

“My investigator, yes. What’s the problem?”

“You on first name terms with him then?” Pike said.

“All right, forget about telling you what happened. We can go to sleep.”

“No, no,” Jack and Pike said together.

“So he leaves his card under my door,” Dani said, “with a note that he got my message and he’ll circle back.”

“He said that, *circle back?*” Pike said, “or you’re just . . . whadyamacall . . . paraphrasing.”

“Unh-huh, that’s what he wrote.”

“Sheez,” Jack said.

“You guys can make fun of it all you want, but the fact is he didn’t return.”

They all considered it for a minute.

“How many hours ago was he here?” Pike said.

“Well it’s 3:35 now,” Dani said. “So, 4 or 5.”

“So he’ll stop in tomorrow night,” Pike said. “Piece of cake.”

Jack said, “And by then you’ll be feeling better, you won’t need to go out for air.”

“And there won’t be any strange younger guys in your room, either, that you’ll have to explain away,” Pike said, though he didn’t like thinking about that. Did this mean he’d actually be continuing to Arizona with this fool?

Dani was a good host, if that’s what you called it under these circumstances, and she set Pike and Jack up on the floor on both sides of the bed with enough bedding to make it work, and she turned off the light.

Pike was so shot that he could have been laying on jagged rock and it wouldn’t have mattered, and he dropped right off, and for two hours he was on a pure white beach in Hawaii and you could feel the tropical breeze and beautiful women were parading past, one after another, cooling off in the crystal-clear water.

The rapping on the door was only a couple of taps, but it sounded like a machine gun.

Dani bolted up to attention and kind of gasped, and whispered what should she do, and Pike didn't know what to tell her, and Jack didn't either, and they both turned over and pulled the makeshift bedding over their heads.

Dani turned on a little light and called to the person that she'd be right there, and she threw on a robe and slippers, and then took the time to brush her teeth, which Pike wondered, was that the *best* idea, keeping this official person standing out there?

Arnold was cordial and polite when she opened the door, but wasted no time coming in. You could feel him sizing up Pike and Jack being there, but he didn't say anything right then, which Pike admitted would be the professional way to go about it, you make mental notes and at the end draw your big conclusion.

"When I attempted the bed check earlier," Arnold was saying, "you were *where* now?"

"I didn't know we're terming it a *bed check*," Dani said.

"A question of semantics," Arnold said. "But I believe we understand each other."

"Out," Dani said.

Pike was thinking, *not the greatest answer*, but at the same time he had to give her credit.

"I see," Arnold said. "With these gentlemen?"

Pike let go of the blanket covering his face and squinted up at Arnold for the first time. You weren't going to make things any worse.

Arnold said to Pike, "Would you happen to have some identification, son?" And to Jack as well, "I'll be needing yours too, sir."

It was a serious moment, but Pike couldn't help thinking, *wait a second, I'm son but that piece of garbage is sir?*

In any case, Pike decided to say, "I don't have any on me." *Test the sucker*. For all he knew, the guy wasn't a regulation cop. Maybe he was just some kind of civilian inspector they hired.

Jack picked up on it, and said he didn't have any ID either.

"They're not under-age, if that's what you're worried about," Dani said. "And as you can see, I'm simply providing them housing for the night . . . My cousin . . . and his friend, they're on their way to New Mexico."

"Arizona," Pike said, but it was interesting that she had New Mexico on the brain.

Arnold nodded, clearly not believing any of it, but pulled a notepad out and poked around, opening some drawers, shining a little flashlight here and there.

As the guy moved around the room, one thing was obvious. He lifted weights. He was about 5'10 and had either a shaved head by choice or a prematurely bald one, but either way it looked like a cue ball on top of a bank safe.

"If you don't mind me asking you," Pike said, "are you into bodybuilding?"

The guy tried to maintain a poker face, but it was clear he enjoyed the question. "Yep," he said, "it's a hobby."

"You look cut," Jack chimed in. He was up and sitting in a chair. "You compete, and all that?"

"I do," Arnold said. "Be glad to tell you all about it, except in a different forum . . . This ain't the right time, though."

Pike was thinking, real cops probably said *ain't* occasionally too, so you couldn't go by that completely, but something about the guy in general made you think he maybe flunked out of the police academy, or didn't get in in the first place.

Plus, if you had to bet on it, he looked roided-up.

Pike wondered about his name now too, not that many Arnold's around. "You a fan of Arnold Schwarzenegger then?" he said.

"I was wondering that too," Jack said, "and if you changed your name."

Arnold didn't react too well to that. "You kids think you're pretty slick," he said. "But yessir, the man's been an idol of mine. Along with a couple others . . . Name's my middle name, so there you go. I tend to use it, brings me luck."

Pike was thinking, *yeah right, mister*.

You could tell Dani wasn't thrilled by this give-and-take, and told Arnold to please not mind them, they're simply acting out because they're tired.

"You're right," Pike said.

"And to take it a step further," Jack said, "what's the hold up?"

"Sir?" the guy said with an edge now, looking sideways at Jack.

Pike said, "You got a badge or something, we can see? Some kinda ID?"

"He doesn't," Jack said. "He's one of those, what do they call them? Drugstore cowboys?"

"No," Pike said, "I know what you mean, but that's not what you call it . . . That'd be *ro-day-oh* cowboy."

"What is *that*?" Jack said.

Pike said, "You remember that kid Ferguson, on the freshman team?"

“No.”

“Doesn’t matter, he moved somewhere. But when he was here he worked in that feed place, you know, on Lindemore? He got me some hours filling in for a guy . . . They sold hats and boots and stuff, and the employees, they were always making fun of *ro-day-oy* cowboys coming in.”

“I *still* don’t get it,” Jack said.

“Oh for God sakes,” Dani said. “This is so stupid. *Ro-day-oh* Drive is a very upscale shopping district in Beverly Hills . . . What Pike seems to be getting at, and I’m not sure why, is when a non-cowboy tries to dress like one, the real cowboys make fun of that.”

“Right,” Pike said, “I’m getting at it because that’s the situation we got here, I think.” Staring at Arnold.

“Okay, I see what you mean,” Jack said, watching Arnold too. “That’s pretty funny actually, a *ro-day-oh* cowboy . . . And who knows, maybe even one on steroids.”

There was an uneasy silence. Jack might have gone just a little too far with his final shot, but what could you do.

Pike could understand it though. You got some wannabe doofus waking you up in the middle of the night, he’s got what he came for, which is Dani hasn’t skipped town and is right here cooperating . . . so you can’t check off a box or something and be on your way?

Arnold gave a little cough, as though to let everybody know he’d sized up the situation and was making his determination.

“Ms. Andriessen,” he said, “I’m going to have to cite you tonight on two fronts--Article 28, maintaining an unstable location, and also Article 6a, accommodating an overnight companion . . . That part I’m giving you a break, only citing you once for it, even though there’s two of ‘em currently.”

“You’re kidding me,” Dani said, “even with me notifying you? . . . I mean taking the responsibility to do so? . . . That doesn’t count?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“Well Gosh . . . what happens now then?” she said. Pike could tell she was scared. Dani was a strong woman, plus she was good at putting up a front, but there was a wobble in her voice that was real.

“I’m afraid that’s out of my hands, it’s for the court to decide,” Arnold said.

“Meaning the judge,” Dani said.

“That’s normally correct, yes.”

“Well how *is* mine?” she said. “Could you . . . give me a sense, please?”

“Your case,” Arnold said, taking pleasure in going through his paperwork, torturing her, “is Judge Stramm, it looks like . . . He’s a tough one. A stickler for details, so to speak . . . Anyhow Ma’am, I wish you the best.”

He got to the door, opened it, and was halfway through it when Pike blurted out, “I’ll arm-wrestle you for it.”

Arnold swiveled around, showing an amused grin. “Excuse me?” he said.

“One go-round,” Pike said. “All’s you got to do is put me down.”

Arnold stood there looking at Pike like he was a sub-human. “And if I did?” he said.

“Then we’re good. And you submit your paperwork.”

“I’m submitting my paperwork anyway . . . so what’s in it for me.”

Jack said, “Not if you lose, you’re not.”

“That’s right,” Pike said.

“Sounds fair to me, actually,” Dani chimed in.

Arnold stepped back in the room and closed the door.

He was still smiling, though it was more an in-your-face smirk. “Well now seeing as how y’all insulted me . . . and I let it roll off . . . if I *were* to take you up on that son, we’d need a little collateral.”

“Fine,” Pike said. He asked Jack how much he had on him.

“I started the trip with a hundred,” Jack said, “it got drained though, the barbeque place and all.”

Pike said, “So 75?”

“I guess,” Jack said, “if I *have* to . . . What, you don’t got anything on you?”

“First of all,” Pike said, “you *owe* me. Big time. I think we know what we’re talking about . . . Second, even if I did, I’m not putting it on the line for this piece of scum.”

Pike was hoping that’d have the desired effect, which was put the guy over the edge so he was all-in. Hopefully he hadn’t gone *too* far, and ticked the guy off enough to try to punch him in the face . . . or in the possible event that he actually *was* some kind of real cop, arrest him.

“So what we’re dealing with,” Arnold said, and Pike was relieved he was going this direction, “I win, you pay me 75 bucks.”

“And of course you file your important paperwork,” Pike said.

“Goes without saying,” the guy said.

“But if *I* win,” Pike said, taking a long look at the guy, “if it happens . . . you don’t file jack.”

Dani clearly liked the idea, and she was already clearing off the little round motel table and arranging two chairs across from each other.

Arnold was laughing though. “You don’t gotta worry about that kid.” He took off his sport coat and loosened his tie and rolled up his shirtsleeves.

His arms were bulging and there was a tattoo of a dancing girl on his right forearm that was quivering just a bit.

Pike took one of the seats and Jack said, “Just like that? You armwrestle a guy in your boxers, and *barefoot*? Don’t you need a little traction, at least?”

Pike said he was good, and Arnold made a big production out of sitting down, kind of like the heavyweight champ does it in a boxing match, letting the other guy commit himself and then methodically rubbing it in his face.

But then when he finally did get his rear end in the chair it happened kind of quick, both of them with elbows on the center of the table and locking hands and staring each other down and getting set.

“Hold it just a second now,” Jack said. “One more time, so we have the ground rules straight: Pike wins, Dani’s in the clear. There’s no negative paperwork . . . Arnold Schwarzenegger, *you* win . . . you get the money.”

“Damn straight,” Arnold said, “plus the shit gets filed.”

“Of course,” Jack said. “On the count of three . . . one, two . . . three, get it on!”

Pike figured the best way to handle it would be let the idiot try as hard as he could, and don’t let him move your hand, but don’t move his either.

This would be the most rewarding way, burn the guy out so he has nothing left, but it would also look more realistic and attract less attention from the dude, and from Jack too, as to how a 170-pound high school kid soaking wet could pin this comic book monstrosity.

You could see some alarm in Arnold’s eyes when Pike’s arm didn’t move. Arnold tilted his head and came out of the chair a little, which you weren’t supposed to do but what was the difference, and when that didn’t work he began to snort.

Jack picked up on it. “Dog, you’re snorting like a pig,” he said.

“How much time has it been?” Pike said.

“Perhaps 2 minutes?” Dani said.

“I have to tell you,” Pike lied, “this guy *is* tough. I don’t think I can hold him off much longer . . . My best shot, is to try everything to put him down. Otherwise, I’m afraid it’s all over.”

Arnold was sweating profusely, a substantial stream of liquid now rolling down his bald dome. He looked at Pike like *what the frig?*

Pike debated, should he slam him down so he could injure him in the process, or should he ease him down . . . and that seemed the better option, and you could see the two locked fists begin to shift to the left, and even to an outside observer Arnold wasn’t going to be turning this one around.

Pike got him an inch from the table, and then hovered there for a minute to torture the guy with a dash of false hope, and then smacked Arnold’s arm into the shiny fake wood of the motel table.

“Wow,” Jack said, genuinely shocked.

Pike said to Jack, “Like I been telling you. You’re one of those people who pretends he’s on board, but then in secret is rooting *against* me.”

“That’s ridiculous, you would have cost me 75 bucks.”

“Very true, that part, but you’re still not sure you like the outcome.”

“You know something Gillette? Okay I made a little error back home . . . but I’ve been putting up with your bull-crap all day. I’m done with that.”

“Double-or nothing left-handed,” Arnold said.

“Huh?” Pike said.

“You heard me . . . all right you got lucky *one* time, ‘cause I never got my proper grip . . . been known to happen. Not gonna leave here though without the record set straight, that I didn’t get beat by a little pipsqueak.”

“When you say double or nothing,” Dani said, “how would that work?” Pike thought she seemed at least a little relieved, though it was hard to tell.

Arnold said, “Exactly what it sounds. I win, you pay me \$150.”

“*That’s* the extent of it, double or nothing?” Jack said.

Pike said, “Seeing as how you called me a pipsqueak . . . nah.”

“Come *on* now,” Arnold said, his eyes suddenly very big. “Let’s be reasonable here. Give a man a chance, will ya.”

“Tell ya what,” Pike said. “How much you got on you?”

Without hesitation, Arnold pulled out his wallet and started rifling through the money section. “Looks like about a c-note’s worth, total,” he said.

Jack said, “With all due respect, the thickness alone, a c-note sounds a little light.”

“Okay, I can come up with 2,” Arnold said. “Long as you can too.”

“3,” Pike said.

Arnold blew out an exhale and took all the cash out of his wallet and started counting it off and came up with the \$300.

“You can hand it over to my cousin Dani,” Pike said, “for safe-keeping.”

Arnold did, but said, “So where’s *your* 3 at, though?”

“What are you talking about?” Pike said.

“Yeah, don’t be changing the rules,” Jack said.

“For your information pal,” Arnold said, “double or nothing means we raise the stakes. On both sides.”

“Right,” Pike said. “Our 75--or Jack’s actually--against your 3 . . . My left-hand’s my weaker side, so it should be a piece of cake.”

Arnold grumbled something about *have it your blanketly-blank way*, and he sat back down, no dramatic entry this time, just wanting to take care of business and get out of here with his wallet--and pride--intact.

Jack said go.

This time Pike let Arnold have the satisfaction of gaining the edge, pushing Pike’s arm halfway down. But that was going to be it.

Pike said, “I see what you mean. Pumping all that iron, you got both sides equal-strength, it feels like.”

Arnold was putting everything into it and couldn’t answer even if he wanted to. Pike decided it would be fun to go a little see-saw, put him most of the way down, let him recover and put *you* most of the way down, and so on and so forth.

By about the eighth one of these Dani said, “Arnold, I’m not kidding, you don’t look well. Please don’t have a heart attack, it’s not worth it.” She was correct of course, the guy was white as a sheet, and almost at that point where you *stop* sweating, which is dangerous.

Pike could also detect a note of seriousness in Dani, that she was genuinely concerned about the guy who could put her back in jail. She *was* awfully good-hearted, she did have that side to her, though when you looked at in another way, and thought of poor Chuck, the *don’t have a heart attack* part was pretty hilarious.

In any case Pike had had about enough, and it was time to put Arnold out of his misery. He reversed the see-saw one final time, and eased the guy's arm past the normal stopping point and, he wasn't sure if he should or not, but he figured what the heck and just for good measure slammed the guy's arm into the table at the very end.

Arnold let out a disappointingly (for a tough guy) high-pitched, teenaged-girl like, "Owwwww . . .!"

Pike was pretty sure he didn't break anything, not like with Foxe, or even the dishonest lab guy in Santa Monica, but it wasn't the worst thing to give the guy something to think about.

"Well that about settles it then," Jack said, and if he was shocked at the second result he was putting on a good act.

"I suppose it does, yes," Dani said. And to Arnold, "So . . . have a good two weeks and I'll see you next time."

Arnold didn't say anything. He kind of staggered to his feet, put on his jacket, and then, like you knew he would, lunged at his 300 dollars that was sticking out of Dani's hand.

Dani anticipated this and deftly avoided him, and Pike grabbed his arm, and Jack, getting more bold now that'd he seen the guy go down in flames twice, bear-hugged Arnold around the back, and Dani opened the door and Pike and Jack threw the guy out it.

Dani closed it back up and put on the little chain. She said, "Well *that* was interesting."

"Yeah man, I mean damn . . ." Jack said.

"Not a big thing," Pike said. "You have to believe me on that."

Jack said to Dani, "He's stronger than he looks, that's for sure . . . There was like this incident, at school . . . he hoisted up a major weight just in time for this other dude to break his hand all up on."

"I know exactly what you're saying," Dani said. "The heat of the moment can fuel all sorts of unknowns."

"What she's getting at," Pike said, "is . . . if the stars were aligned . . . the odds bucked up against you and all . . . *you* could've have handled that guy yourself. And I believe you could have." He winked at Dani.

Dani ignored him but said, "More importantly, what's to preclude Arnold from following through and filing his unfavorable report with the court?"

"I doubt it," Jack said, "though maybe it wouldn't hurt to call him." Jack was tapping his phone and suddenly you heard all their voices, and Arnold loud and clear agreeing to the

conditions of the arm-wrestling match as he and Pike were first getting squared away at the little table.

“Good idea,” Pike said. “I was wondering what you were doing there, needing to get the rules straight a hundred times.”

Jack said to Dani, “Might as well call him right now. Let him know you heard a audio record of those rules being confirmed.”

Dani went in the bathroom and called Arnold. When she came back, she said, “He didn’t seem too *into* the paperwork aspect, to be honest.”

Pike said, “Yeah, well, give him a few days, he’ll at least consider it. The good thing, the reason he’ll be inclined to forget about it, is he’ll take a look at the full picture.”

“Yep,” Jack said. “The gambling-on-the-job part, that could be problematic.”

Dani said, “Well, as I say, that was quite an adventure. Now we can at least get a few more hours of sleep.”

“That . . . or, you hungry at all?” Pike said to Jack.

“I never thought you’d ask,” Jack said. “Gillette-dog, after that little episode, I am starved up the wazoo.”

“Me too,” Pike said, waiting on Dani.

“Oh no,” she said. “You mean we have to go *out*? It’s not even light . . . And who on earth can eat a meal at this hour.”

Pike and Jack waited. No need to answer a question like that.

Chapter 24

Dani insisted that three different restaurants in the vicinity of the motel were open 24 hours, and they walked to all of them--Pike thinking they were looping around in the dark like chickens with their heads cut off--and all three were closed.

Finally they had to squeeze back in the pick up and start driving around, and even *that* wasn't easy, but then there was a Denny's, which Pike didn't love but would work, so they parked and got out, but then on the side street they spotted *Ida's Country Kitchen* and you could see the lights on in there and smoke coming out of the roof and that was the place.

"Think our friend Arnold is hungry too?" Jack said. He was sitting in the booth next to Dani, Pike on the other side. In this particular light, with his day-old beard, Jack looked older, and if you stretched it a little he could have been the same age as Dani, or close enough, and he had his arm stretched out on the back of the booth behind her, like you do when you're in tight quarters . . . so not necessarily meaning anything by it, but Dani didn't seem to mind it and looked perfectly comfortable next to him sipping her coffee.

Which pissed Pike off.

At any rate . . . he said, "Not the main agenda I'm sitting here wondering about, to be honest."

"Yeah but think of it," Jack said. "A guy like that, does he even *eat* breakfast? Or is it all those protein shake jobs."

"I must say," Dani said, "now that we have a bit of perspective . . . and of course some breathing room thanks to Jack . . . the whole experience, surreal as it was, was quite entertaining."

"Hold on," Pike said, "you say *thanks to Jack* . . . that's it?"

"Why yes," Dani said, looking across the table at him like he just asked the dumbest question of all time. "The gumption, and wherewithal, and presence of mind to record it unfolding in the heat of the moment . . . all to preserve my interest . . . I'd say that was brilliant."

And just when it couldn't get any more ridiculous, she actually turned and raised up and gave Jack a peck on the cheek.

"What, you're *kissing* guys now?" Pike said. "How about over here then?"

"Very funny," Dani said, and not really smiling.

"Well Gillette," Jack said, "let me ask you this, are we out of here today? . . . Or what was your thought on that?"

"That was the plan, yeah," Pike said. "Not that it affects anything, but it just dawned on me, *boom*, tomorrow's Christmas Eve already . . . Dang."

"Bummer," Jack said.

"You don't like Christmas Eve?"

"That's not it. It's that we're taking off."

Dani said, "If I could interject . . . If it influences your decision, you are *not* an imposition . . . not in the least."

"Sweet then," Jack said.

"Getting back to Chuck for minute," Pike said to Dani, ignoring Jack's excitement, "where was he from?"

"Oh boy . . ." she said. "Fine. Lawrence, Kansas."

"How'd you meet him?"

"In Pocatello. I think you know all this."

"I mean *how*."

"Okay you're going to laugh, but it was a Karaoke night."

"Those can be fun, what'd you sing?" Jack said.

Pike ignored it and continued. "It said he was a steamfitter, the news report."

"That's correct," Dani said. "He was a hard worker, I might add."

"What else?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. He was a solid citizen, I suppose. He went to church most Sundays."

Pike was starting to think . . . you have fun singing songs with the guy, you admire his work ethic, he's a good Christian or whatever religion . . . *then why'd you have to drown the motherfucker?*

"He spend time anywhere else, in between his Kansas and Idaho gigs?" Pike said.

"Yes. A few years in Bozeman, was my understanding."

"Montana?"

“Un-huh. But that was a while back . . . Pike, you’re starting to sound like one of the police detectives. A slightly different line of questioning, but the same idea.”

“Yeah, well,” he said.

It was starting to feel overwhelming. He’d sort of made his decision the last day-and-a-half to try to spring Dani on the way to Arizona.

The nonsense with Arnold, when it came down to it, that was only a band aid. Okay, so most likely they maneuvered their way out of this one, but so what, the lady was going *down* in the end . . . you could dance around it all you wanted, but Pike couldn’t see a simple way out of it.

But . . . if you could go back and do something about it . . . she could go on home, at least for now, *until she may or may not do the next stupid thing*.

You’d at least be clearing the slate, and you’d be heading down to see Mitch with a little lighter load. And it was Christmas, for Gosh sakes . . .

They finished eating and went back to the motel, and the sun was coming up and it already had the feel of a clear, warm day, no doubt one reason people liked to come down here in December, and Pike took a look at some of the tourist brochures in the lobby, and when he checked the pool there was Jack in a recliner, stretched out fast asleep.

Dani was on a little bench in one of the patio areas checking her phone. Sprinklers were watering lawns all over the place.

Pike said, “Man, they don’t conserve water, eh?”

“Not here,” Dani said. “Listen . . . I didn’t mean to downplay what you did last night.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Pike said. “Which Karaoke place did you meet Chuck at?”

“Well *that’s* quite a transition,” she said. “There’s a place in Blackfoot, since you seem so interested. So not technically Pocatello, kind of the burbs . . . Fairly well known, on Thursday nights.”

“When was it?”

“You mean how far along in that night’s event? . . . Or are you asking what date?”

“Yeah. The date. Which Thursday.”

“Oh no, you’re not going to make me re-create it are you?”

“I’m trying to get a handle on it. It can’t hurt.”

“Well let’s see . . . the weekend of the, you know, incident . . . that was right after Thanksgiving, which is why we came down here, we had a long weekend.”

Pike was searching his phone. "Thanksgiving was the 24th," he said, though he was pretty darn sure she knew the date Chuck bit the dust, since the woman was about to be on trial for her life.

Dani said, "That would mean then . . . I'm trying to get this straight . . . two weeks before Thanksgiving we had a casino night at school, the annual fundraiser? So I met Chuck the week before."

Pike said, "So . . . the 3rd then?"

"That sounds right . . . and since you have what you need, we may as well go over to the pool. It's early, but it's still surprisingly refreshing."

"You met Chuck waiting around as fellow contestants . . . it was like that?"

"Not really. It was--how shall I say--the usual, uninteresting pickup give-and-take that goes on. I was sitting at the bar afterward, and he offers to buy me a drink."

"You ever go back there again?"

"No, just the once. My girlfriend was with me, if I didn't mention that. Janice. It was kind of something different to try, that was all, and Blackfoot is 25 minutes away."

"Chuck go again? Or before?"

"I think so, yes."

"You think so, *and*? Come on, you need to work with me here."

"My Goodness . . . for the life of me I can't understand *what's* with all these questions, Pike? . . . But yes, for your information, he'd participated previously I believe. It never occurred to me to ask about it, but the Karaoke person knew his name, and all."

Pike thought, *was there anything else?*

"What did the piece of scum look like?" he said.

"What difference could *that* possibly make?"

"No difference . . . But like a big-boned red-headed guy, or what?"

"He looked like a hundred other men, honestly. Around 6 feet tall, brown hair. Medium-dark skin . . . You twist my arm, he was reasonably attractive, yes . . . He did have a small tattoo on his shoulder, a pirate. It was supposed to be from the Raiders, the football team."

"Ah Jeez."

"Can we please cut the man some slack? Since he's no longer with us?"

"Well that should about wrap it up," Pike said. "I believe I'm more on board with your situation, having a feel for how it played out, which isn't the worst thing. Thank you." What he

was wondering now, but not exactly something you'd ask Dani, was where was some place pre-1956 that would work?

Dani said she was going back to the room and would see him at the pool. Pike found Jack, shook him awake, and said, "I gotta do a couple errands. Do me a favor."

Jack was rubbing his eyes and stretching. "Anything, my brother. Now that we're back on good terms."

Pike wondered how he might have jumped to *that* conclusion.

Anyhow, he said, "If Dani joins you out here . . . and if she happens to wear a bikini or something, which she is liable to . . . don't oggle her."

"Huh?" Jack said.

"Show a little maturity. Be polite."

Jack smiled, mostly awake now. "I'll keep it in mind," he said. "Like I'm sure you do too."

Part of Pike wanted to smack the guy just for fun, and for the first time in a while he remembered that incident pretty clearly at the water fountain, and *god dang*, it seemed so long ago.

But instead of that, he figured he better be practical, in case one thing really *was* going to lead to another, and he went back to the room himself for a minute, packed up his and Jack's stuff, and threw it in the back of the truck, telling Dani don't worry about it, he was just getting organized.

Chapter 25

Pike asked them in the lobby if there were any schools or city buildings or historic structures nearby. The desk person wasn't in the mood, it seemed like, and without giving it any effort said they didn't know of any.

So Pike got in the truck, and, no good reason other than he hadn't been that way yet, started driving away from downtown.

It started getting wide open and there wasn't much, and you became real aware that you were in the desert, and when there *was* something it was mostly golf courses and big resorts and a couple of country clubs. But one of them, it looked like, had one of those round things set pretty deep back in there, between what if you took a wild guess would be between the 15th green and the 16th tee, the word coming to Pike now was a *gazebo*.

So he parked along the side of the road and surveyed the situation. There was a plaque out front that said Crystal Hills Country Club and the way in was through a gigantic iron gate where a guy in a hut checked you in, if you happened to be a member.

The club did have the old, stodgy look of something Pike imagined you'd see back east. The main thing, it would qualify as a launching point. If you could get inside it. And so far no other pre-1956 options were jumping out, and Pike was getting restless to take care of this, and also, less important but even so, he wasn't crazy about leaving Hannamaker alone with Dani for any longer than necessary.

One way would be to simply drive right past the guard-hut person and not worry about it, and by the time they tracked you down back at the gazebo you'd hopefully be gone. But the problem was, the truck would still be there, sticking out like a sore thumb.

So Pike figured screw it, and he decided he really wasn't in a good mood at all, which made it easier, and he locked the truck and walked onto the grounds of the country club the way the cars drove onto it, and he waved to the guy in the hut and kept right on walking.

He heard the guy yell something, and Pike turned around and acknowledged the guy and pointed up ahead toward the main club grounds like he had some kind of business to take care of. Hopefully that might work, and Pike kept moving.

But when he checked over his shoulder the guard-dude, a young guy unfortunately, was out of the hut now and hustling toward him, and Pike didn't want to but now he had no choice and he threw himself into gear and sprinted toward that gazebo.

There wasn't going to be any fooling around today with radio stations and all that nonsense, this would hopefully just be a straight shot out to Pocatello, and he'd hope for the best in terms of the timing. So as he ran toward the gazebo he visualized Utah State . . . the recruiting trip, that other quarterback guy who was with him, the downtown, the stadium, the snowcaps you could see from campus.

The good thing about that recruiting trip, which he'd looked it up to confirm, was it took place only two weeks before Dani's Karaoke adventure . . . so you use it as a foundation, put a little forward thinking on it, and you had a reasonable shot.

Then as he got closer he shifted his focus specifically to the Super 8 where'd he'd stayed that night, not far from where the Salt Lake City Express bus had dropped him off and Dani had picked him up, after he'd gone AWOL from the Utah State gig.

He could see the guy still pursuing him, but slowing down. A guy like that seemed determined, unlikely he'd give up, but there was a slight uphill and it would take him a while.

There was foursome of golfers getting ready to tee off about 20 yards to the right of the gazebo, but Pike wasn't worried about them, they'd be occupied worrying about keeping their head down and their hips aligned or whatever golfers do, and he sat down right in the middle of the gazebo and closed his eyes and after a minute the all-too-familiar *shake, rattle and roll and spin* routine started up, and *Bang*, he was tripping.

It was strange. As he was coming to, about to focus on his surroundings, whatever they might be, it was bugging him more and more that Dani and Hannamker were back there without him, and that dominated his thinking for a moment.

He had to concede, Jack did carry himself like an older guy. And the son of a gun was bold. Look at that college girl situation . . . and after all that, with he and Pike running out of there that night, the guy has the nerve to go back and see her again.

And . . . don't forget about Jocelyn . . . and God knows *who* else.

Despite her sometimes highly dysfunctional behavior though, Pike knew Dani well enough that she wouldn't be into an 18-year-old guy who'd just come out of the pool and was laying next to her on a stretch-out patio chair at 10 in the morning though . . . Right?

Would she?

Disconcerting as this question might be, Pike figured he better pay attention to what was currently going on with *him*, and he looked around, and the first thing he saw was a sign that said **Speed Limit 75**.

This couldn't be good.

He was on the shoulder of some highway and there weren't many cars, but the ones that did pass by were flying. He was able to pick up Utah license plates on most of them, and Idaho plates on some of the others, so it wasn't exactly like you were celebrating any success, but it did seem he was in the right part of the country.

The problem was there were no exits in sight. No side roads, buildings, gas stations, fast food places, loose people . . . nothing. Nothing but rolling hills which felt like foothills to some larger mountain range, and it could be miles to any kind of an exit, even if you sucked it up and jogged it, and even then the exit might be only for some hot springs or monument 20 miles away. It was also surprisingly chilly, but that was the least of it.

So Pike stuck out his thumb. He couldn't remember doing that since Henry had picked him up that time when he'd ended up at Bellmeade High School by accident.

This was definitely different. You had to give yourself some distance to the road so you didn't get obliterated by a vehicle who might not be paying 100 percent attention. And also, if you got lucky and someone decided to stop and at least check you out, you hoped they didn't cause an accident doing that either.

Which is what almost happened after about 20 minutes, a beat-up Toyota Corolla stopped about an eighth of mile up ahead, and to do that they had to cross from the fast lane across the slow lane onto the shoulder, nearly cutting off a semi in the process, but everyone survived and Pike hustled up to the vehicle.

There was a guy and a girl, about his age, the girl driving and the guy with a cast on his right foot that came up to the knee.

"Hey," Pike said, "should I get in, or do you need to ask questions first?"

The guy didn't say anything but the girl laughed and said, "Well, we're headed north, if that helps you out."

Pike thanked them and sat in back and he debated going through the whole pain-in-the-ass rigamaroll, asking what day it was . . . and month . . . and then year. Not to mention making sure they were actually in Utah headed toward Idaho.

He decided for now to leave it all alone, and said to the guy, "What happened to your leg?"

The kid wasn't into talking much, and he mumbled, "It got messed up."

The girl, who by now had introduced herself as Eva, said, "He's got strained ligaments. You can tell he's not a happy camper."

The kid looked athletic enough so Pike said, "Playing ball?"

The guy nodded. Eva said, "It hasn't been long. Dave was . . . is . . . hoping for a big year. He was the leading scorer on our team last season, so he's still coming to grips with it."

"That's tough," Pike said, adding on, in case they wanted to throw in a date, "when did this happen?"

"Wednesday," Eve said. "Against Twin."

"So, like what . . . the 22nd or so?"

"Around that . . . I think Wednesday was the 25th, actually."

Pike was suddenly alarmed about something. Basketball season, at least in California, overlapped football slightly, but it didn't kick off until November . . . Which meant he was probably screwed.

"You're saying, November *25th*," he said, trying to downplay the November part, but really needing to know now.

"What are you talking about?" Eva said. "We're still in October. Tomorrow's Halloween."

"That's what I meant," Pike lied.

"I'm not sure," Eva said, "it seemed like you were genuinely mixed up . . . Are you sure you're okay? . . . How long were you out there on the highway waiting?"

"I'm good," Pike said, and of course relieved that he apparently hadn't screwed up the timing after all. "What threw me off for a second, where I'm from there're no games in October."

"Here neither," the guy Dave chimed in. "This was a scrimmage. Optional, which is the killer."

"So where are *you* from?" Eva said.

"San Francisco," Pike said, for no particular reason.

"It was a freak play too," Dave said, coming to life a little. "I'm on the drive, I'm crossing over to the hole, I *got* this, and then a stupid teammate, he tries to set a pick. From the blind side. My plant leg got pretty much wasted."

"That was Henley Rodgers," Eva said. "He means well. He's a football player, he's awkward."

“So, like, what school?” Pike said, suddenly a little panicky that he still hadn’t confirmed where the heck he was.

“Ours? Sunderberg,” Eva said.

“Sorry, that’s *where*?”

“Blackfoot,” she said. And here you went again with the weird karma. Unpredictable as it all was, things had a way of lining up.

Pike said, “This is out of left field, but you know a Karaoke place there?”

“Sorry, I’m not a Karaoke person,” Eva said.

“He means Robinson’s, probably,” Dave said. “Bud, let me ask you though . . . what were you *doing* back there, all stranded.”

Pike didn’t feel like having to drum up the energy and manufacture something. “I’m not sure,” he said.

“Babe, leave him alone,” Eva said, “he doesn’t want to talk about it. Maybe his girlfriend broke up with him, or something.”

The way she said it, the gleam in her eye that you could pick up in her voice, made Pike think if *she’d* break up with *Dave*, *they* could pick up where that left off.

And at that point, naturally Pike’s radar went up and he took it a step further. Could someone like Eva be a version of Audrey . . . reincarnated in some weird way? . . . And just happening to be barrelling up I-15, with him stuck on the side of the road?

It seemed unlikely, and Pike told himself, *Here he was, reaching again*. That the world didn’t revolve around *him*. That he needed to get past the dumb notion that he was destined to meet up with her, no matter what. *I mean, come on*.

So forget all that. But the fact was, Eva was cute, and bubbly and smart, and a real welcome fresh face at the moment.

Pike wondered if he’d ever have the guts to pull a Hannamaker, and move right in on someone and insert himself front and center into the picture and not worry about the collateral damage.

Getting back to business though, he said, “Blackfoot then, that’s where you’re on the way to currently?”

“No,” Eva said. “We’re going to Pokey. That okay?”

“Oh, yeah, no worries . . . Much appreciated . . . Actually would you be able to drop me at, or even near’s fine, that Super 8 up on the hill?”

“Now that’s funny,” she said, “‘cause Dave works a shift there. Saturday mornings. Not that actual location, the one in Blackfoot.”

“Probably going to be adding more shifts now,” Dave said. “Since I can’t do nothing else.”

Pike sort of felt bad for the guy, even though he was grumpy. He could relate to what he was going through, the frustration of not being able to compete. Since he was here anyhow, he almost felt like working in a little trip back to Wednesday, and interrupt that oaf from running into his leg.

But Hey, you couldn’t do everything.

Pike said, “I really like the place. I stayed there once.”

“Well, since we’re on the subject,” Dave said. “I’ll go in with you. I can get you a deal.”

“Man, thanks,” Pike said. “Every little bit helps, honestly.”

Soon enough they were pulling in, and everything looked the same, and he followed Dave inside, and the only *tiny* detail to make sure of now was that it was still 2016, and Pike signed something that had the date on it and now he could fully relax, thank God.

Not that there wasn’t work ahead of him, but a nice room, and discounted, was really going to hit the spot after last night.

And then he’d begin worrying about Mr. Chuck.

Back outside Eva said, “I’d ask you if have all your stuff, but I realize there *was* no stuff.” Looking at him for an explanation, and this time Dave said, “E, let’s give the guy a break. It is what it is.” And he reached out his hand to Pike.

Pike was starting to like them both a little, and asked if anyone was hungry.

Dave said, “You gotta be kidding, asking that . . . We got a party tonight though, so we’re going to try to hold out.”

“We stopped at a Wendy’s on the way from Salt Lake,” Eva said, but neither one really convinced Pike so he said, “Well I’m starved, and I’m treating. That make any difference?”

Dave said well . . . in that case there was a Mexican place that took good care of you, big portions and cheap. So Pike got back in the car with them and next thing they were scarfing down chips and salsa like there was no tomorrow, and waiting for the main dishes to arrive.

“So you’re a big spender,” Eva said, enjoying a virgin Margarita.

“Not normally,” Pike said, “but I won a few bucks off a guy, which I didn’t expect.” Dani had insisted he keep the whole 300. He argued with her, but she was adamant, so Pike went

ahead and took the money, and he definitely wasn't going to be offering any of it to Hannamaker.

"What, you bet on something?" Dave said.

"Yeah, it was actually could I beat him at arm-wrestling."

"So you arm-wrestled someone for money," Dave said. "That's not bad."

"*That's* kind of unexpected," Eva said.

"What? That I don't look like a big tough guy? . . . I'm not actually. The key is picking the right opponent."

Dave and Eva got a little kick out of that. Dave said, "Hey, my buddy's party we're hitting later, you should come."

"You really should," Eva said, plenty of fun in her voice, and Pike was feeling guilty, now that he was liking Dave, for picturing himself with her.

It did sound like fun though. Kids his age out *here*, whole different deal. No one knows you, so in a funny way you probably get more attention.

The downside of course . . . the reason he politely declined . . . what if it kind of worked out, and you hooked up with someone back here. And it was still October now, to complicate things a little more.

Speaking of October and all, he said, "But you got school tomorrow, right?"

"We don't worry about that too much, we can handle it," Dave said.

"Plus with it being Halloween tomorrow, you know, everything's kind of funky at school."

So putting it in perspective now--tomorrow being the 31st, Dani and Chuck would be getting to know each other for the first time in a couple days.

One way might be to sidetrack Dani's girlfriend, so she never *took* her to the Karaoke place, but Pike realized he didn't even know who the friend was and had been dumb not to ask Dani.

Even if you did know the friend though, that might not be the cleanest course of action because you might run into Dani in the process, and all bets were off on what something like that might trigger.

"Let me run something by you, if you don't mind," Pike said, realizing he'd been down this road before with Dani and Mitch and whoever else, but so what.

"Anything," Eva said, "this is fun. Thank you for taking us."

“Oh no,” Pike said, “believe me, *you saved me* out there . . . but okay, here’s the scoop. If you were going to stop two people from meeting each other, what would be the best way?”

“How do you mean?” Dave said.

“You mean like a dad, trying to keep his daughter from seeing someone?” Eva said.

Dave said, “She brought that up, because that’s *her* dad.”

Pike said, “I’m thinking more . . . you’ve got two people, that actually haven’t met yet, but you can tell it’s not going to work out.”

“Save ‘em the trouble, then?” Dave said, amused.

“I guess . . . in a nutshell, that’s it, yeah,” Pike said, thinking it really *was* that simple.

Eva said, “Well, I suppose you could contact one of them first, and explain why they’re making a mistake.”

“Or,” Dave said, “*Give* ‘em something. Some kind of prize or some shit.”

Pike said, “You mean an incentive for *not* showing up . . . dang, that’s a pretty good thought, actually.”

“People love winning stuff,” Dave said.

“They do,” Eva said. “And it can cloud their judgment.”

“My aunt,” Dave said, “she paints pictures. She’s never-ever sold one, as far’s I know. But sometimes she’ll win a ribbon at the fair. The ribbon probably costs a quarter, but that one thing keeps her fired up painting the rest of the year.”

“Interesting,” Pike said. They finished their meal and he took care of the check and they went outside.

“I’ll walk it,” he said, “it’s nice out, and I can see the lights up there, where I gotta go, it’s not that far.”

“All right then,” Dave said.

“You’re a mystery person,” Eva said, “so I hesitate to ask . . . but where are you going from here?”

“From here? Arizona actually.”

“Wow,” Dave said.

Pike said, “That came out a little off . . . I’m going to Arizona, at least I think, at Christmas.”

“You have some time until that, then,” Eva said.

“You could say that, yeah,” Pike said. “But I’m thinking . . . when I *do* go, why don’t you guys come down?”

“Well what’s there to do there?” Dave said.

“I’m not sure there’s *anything*,” Pike said, “but we’ll figure something out.”

Dave said, “You’re pretty goofy. In an okay way. Give us your number, anyhow, for future reference.”

Eva pulled out her phone and Pike gave her the number. He wondered again about the reliability of phone contact when you traveled. From his experience, your phone didn’t work when you were back somewhere and tried to call local, and it definitely didn’t work if you tried to call forward. But . . . if Dave called him, say, in January, and it was the same day in Pocatello that it was in Beacon, why wouldn’t that work?

Eva said didn’t he want their number too? And Pike said he didn’t have a phone.

Dave and Eva looked at each other, but didn’t say anything, and Pike said goodbye and started trekking it back to the Super 8.

He slept with the window wide open, and it was a darn cold night but nice and toasty under the covers, and just like last time in this place he slept like a million bucks.

He got up early and showered rearing to go, and out the window if you looked carefully there was a sliver of a snowcap you could see that wasn’t being blocked by the office building across the parking lot, and it felt like the cold energized your brain out here, and all he had to do now was figure out *what* to do.

The place once again had a great breakfast spread, all on the house, and you could make your own waffles. The only issue was the coffee was very weak, so after making sure he was full he went out in search of a Starbucks to start the morning a little more caffeinated.

Which wasn’t that easy, it turned out, and someone told him there was one in Chubbuck and one downtown inside Albertson’s, and Pike sort of knew where they both were and that seemed like way too much work, but then he saw a mom and pop kind of place, *Pokey-Dokey Coffee*, and ducked inside.

The coffee was weak there too, that must be the style out here, so he didn’t fight it any more and sat down and reviewed his options.

Robinson’s, the place in Blackfoot that Eva didn’t know about but Dave did-- that was likely your joint, since how many Karaoke bars could there be up there, where plenty of folks in this part of the country might not have even heard of the town?

Pike asked the girl a couple tables away if he could borrow her phone for a second, and she didn't hesitate for a moment and told him to please help himself. Man, they were friendly out here and the girls were awful wholesome and unpretentious, though Pike had to wonder if some of that was maybe on account of them being Mormon.

Robinson's didn't have a web site, but there was a Yelp page that was pretty lively and up-to-date, and *what do you know*, there was a Halloween gig of some sort tonight, all mixed drinks half price if you were in costume plus free lasagna and chicken wings and creme puffs.

Pike handed the phone back to the girl and thanked her, and he asked did she know of a bus or something that went up to Blackfoot. She said she thought there might be but she didn't want to give him the wrong information, but she'd be glad to call someone who might know.

Again, so *nice*. Pike told her he appreciated it but that wasn't necessary. He was tempted to ask her to come with him tonight and drive him--what's the worst that could happen if you posed the question--but he came to his senses and remembered he unfortunately had Chuck to deal with, if he was lucky, and that would be more than enough on his plate.

Before he left her alone he asked her one more thing, where a Kinko's might be, and that she *did* know and she pointed out the window and explained how to get there, which turned out to be a couple miles.

A lot of walking lately, but what could you do?

The coffee had kicked in enough by now and as he walked over there he decided Dave's idea was worth a shot, or at least a modified version of it, and it was a spacious, comfortable Kinko's where you could rent computer time, and lay out fancy documents and then print them up.

Pike printed a few extra copies that would require duplicate signatures, the more official-looking presentation the better, and racked his brain if there was anything else he could add on, and decided there wasn't and got out of there.

Now you had the afternoon to kill. It was awful strange to think that Dani was around right now and not far from here, at her school, all the little kindergarteners no doubt dressed up and Dani telling them 'what a good job' on their costumes.

And this would be . . . what . . . heck, only three, three-and-a-half weeks after she took care of Marcus? Which Pike couldn't place an exact date on but remembered it occurring the around the beginning of the month, so close enough.

One way of course, which he kept coming back to, would be to stick around here until Thursday. Three more days, which could be a little rough but not insurmountable, and that would mean four days total away from Palm Springs when you include arriving here yesterday.

So really only four hours where you've gone missing in Palm Springs, five tops if you had to stay until Friday, so what would it be, mid-afternoon there when you got back?

Not a big deal at all, except of course for Hannamaker having that many more hours with Dani, which, even though it shouldn't, bugged Pike.

But it was tempting . . . all you needed to do, you'd surprise Dani by showing up when she got home from school Thursday . . . she might question why you were back so soon since you were *just* here on your Utah State recruiting trip stop . . . but you could explain your way out of that one.

Then how you'd handle it, which seemed so simple, you occupy her for the evening so she breaks her Karaoke date with her girlfriend and thereby never does meet the bozo.

It seemed clean but Pike knew it wouldn't be, something would go haywire according to one of those *laws of the universe*, and you would have wasted all that time and ended up with a worse result.

The concern obviously was connecting with Dani back here, and it didn't seem right, not to mention you were probably in violation of something or other, and in fact it kind of gave him the creeps.

So dang it, stop with that once and for all and focus on Chuck.

It wasn't a slam dunk of course that the guy would be there tonight, in fact it might be a bit of longshot, except for Dani mentioning they seemed to know him there. If he wasn't, you go to plan B and try to screw him up somehow between now and Thursday so *he* doesn't show up to meet Dani.

Pike had no idea what Plan B would entail, but he didn't want to think about it yet, and he had a good gut feeling that the old boy would be there tonight, the drinks flowing and the festivities rocking and probably, from Chuck's view, plenty of loose women bopping around.

So he went back to the Super 8, and in a touch of irony, laid around the pool. The difference of course was it was nippy, even though it was still technically fall here, so you didn't exactly lounge around sun-bathing. But Pike found a Target nearby and got some swim trunks and the pool was nicely heated, and the hot tub was *beautifully* heated, and after a few

rotations back and forth and a nice long nap in the room he was ready for his evening in Blackfoot.

There was a bus it turned out, and it ran pretty often, but Pike sprung for a taxi, and the guy talked the whole time, mostly about Idaho State sports and specifically what the football team needed to do to get better, and the guy knew his stuff actually, plus he was just another one of those *nice* people you tended to meet out here, so Pike let him ramble and didn't butt in. The guy dropped him off and he hoped he'd left the guy enough of a tip.

One pleasant surprise right off the bat was that *Robinson's*, even though it sure felt like a good-ol-boy bar all-around, was apparently one of those hybrid places that served enough food to qualify as a family operation, so bottom line . . . Pike wouldn't have deal with maneuvering his fake ID.

It was after nine when he got there, which might be early on some nights but with Halloween and all he figured the doofuses didn't want to wait around forever in their outfits, and that things would start earlier.

They weren't kidding on Yelp when they promoted the thing, that it would be a big turnout, and Pike had never seen so many adults staggering around in costumes in his life.

And a good two-thirds of them you couldn't see their heads, and when you could, you couldn't make out their faces due to all the make up.

Pike decided he would *never* participate in something like this, but that was beside the point right now.

He hoped there might be some Karaoke incorporated into the mix, so he'd have a shot at finding Chuck if he *was* here, but it was clear that wasn't going to happen. It was essentially a free-for-all, and guys were hitting on gals pretty consistently, the costumes breaking down an extra barrier of inhibitions, on top of the liquor.

Luckily Pike had double-checked the guy's full name, back in Kinko's, which he'd incorporated into his document.

He'd re-dug up that article he'd read, which was about a month ago back in Beacon, and he remembered where he was because he had the house to himself on a weekday morning because he was finishing off serving his suspension for ripping the letter **H** off the football field scaffold.

The headline was: **Vacationer Dies in Thunderbird Motel Spa.**

But the important part was the son of a bitch's full name was Charles Kolskie, so if he needed it he had it.

People were pouring in and the chaos was only going to get worse. Pike tried to get one of the bartenders' attention but that wasn't going to work, and even if it did the guy wouldn't be able to hear him unless he stood next to him and yelled into his ear, which people were actually doing to get their drinks.

There was an Hispanic kid, a busboy, working his butt off but it wasn't going to matter, as stuff was piling up twice as fast as you could clear anything away.

Pike watched him for a while, and then followed him into the kitchen where you could hear yourself think, at least to an extent.

The kid hustled a rubber bin full of dishes into the dish room and loaded them onto this conveyor-belt contraption, and when he came out Pike pulled out 5 bucks and gave it to the kid and told him he needed a minute.

Pike could tell the guy was nervous about standing around, not because of the 5 bucks probably, but because he had a job to do, and Pike admired his work ethic and told him he'd make it real fast.

"Can you point out a man named Chuck for me please, out in the crowd?" Pike said.

The busboy said he was sorry, but he only knew a handful of people's names, and that wasn't one of them.

So Pike brought up the Karaoke, tried to direct the kid to who might be here now who also showed up on Thursday nights, and he described Chuck as best he could.

"If I had to guess," Pike said, "he'd be one of those performers who thinks they're pretty good, and lets you know."

The kid did try to think, but he came up empty and was polite but needed to get back to work. So Pike dug a little deeper and pulled out a 20, and the kid said give him a minute.

Pike watched him go back out into the throng, and instead of trying to go person to person and see if anything rings a bell, he found a waitress who happened to be carrying a big tray, and she stopped for a minute and Pike guessed they might be speaking Spanish, and she nodded her head a couple times and said some final thing and pointed her head toward the bar and started moving again.

The busboy came back and said someone thinks it's the guy dressed up like a hockey player, and he thanked Pike for the 20 and wished him good luck.

Pike made his way out there which wasn't easy and definitely was no fun. He didn't like being pinned by crowds, and especially drunken ones, and naturally when you tap someone on the shoulder trying to get by and you say *excuse me*, they look at you like they want to fight.

One guy already seemed to take offense, though it was hard to tell how seriously because the doe-doe bird had a rubber mask on.

But Pike had the hockey player in view. Fairly big, raw-boned broad-shouldered looking guy, laughing a lot and too loud, one foot on that brass railing down below and the upper body leaning on the bar in a cocky position. Maybe not, the cocky part, how would you tell . . . but Pike was comfortable interpreting him that way, if it was indeed the guy, so what the heck.

Pike muscled in close, observed the guy for a moment, which was as long as he could take it, and leaned over and said into the ear-hole of his hockey mask--which was even dumber than he'd thought, it wasn't just a helmet with the face shield, it was a *goalie's* mask--"Are you Charles Kolskie."

The guy jerked his head up like *who wants to know*, and Pike could tell by his reaction that he was.

Pike said, "It's about the music. May I speak to you outside for a second?"

"What music is *that*?" Chuck said, playing the tough guy, or maybe just being his normal ornery self.

Pike didn't answer but started making his way back through the crowd and outside, and he was pretty dang sure he'd roped in the mope enough to at least follow him out of curiosity.

It was a relief to be out of there and back in the fresh air, and Pike went down to the corner to put some distance on all the activity at the entrance to the place, and he waited.

It actually took a little longer than he thought, maybe 5 minutes, Chuck probably in there thinking *I'll wait out this twerp and show him who's in charge*, but sure enough there he was, lumbering down to the corner, the goalie mask off now, and under his arm.

Pike shouldn't have been focused on it, but he couldn't help noticing the dude's uniform was the Pittsburgh Penguins. Why would you root for them when you lived in Idaho?

"Good to meet you," Pike said, extending his hand. "I'm Mike Millette, PK Wizard Productions."

Chuck reflexively shook hands, but everything more in slow motion now, and Pike let whatever the guy wanted to read into it, sink in.

"I pegged you off your Karaoke performances," Pike said, realizing suddenly that it's possible the guy hasn't *performed* at one yet, that the waitress just recognized a guy named *Chuck* . . . so how would you handle *that*?

But luckily Chuck said, “Gee . . . thanks.” Definitely in a dream-like state at this point, likely seeing his name popping somewhere in lights.

Pike pulled out the contract he had printed up at Kinko’s. “I think I’ve got everything in order here,” he said. “Uh, let’s see. What’s your date of birth?”

Chuck gave it to him like a robot, and Pike figured if he asked him to give him three backwards laps around the block, Chuck would have given him those no problem too.

Pike said, “What we’re dealing with, is the next level. In Boise.”

“Oh . . . you mean like . . . an audition?” Chuck said.

“More like a controlled one,” Pike said. “You’ve made it to the second round. It’s possible that’ll be the end of the line, but based on the reports I’ve got on you . . . not to mention you’re a good-looking dude . . . you should be moving on.”

“Unreal . . .” Chuck said. “. . . and moving on to *what* . . . if I could ask?”

“I’m glad you *did* ask. We’re in negotiations with *Bravo*, the network. The concept is a street-type throw down . . . very different than *The Voice* or *American Idol* . . . and people get eliminated for different reasons . . . but in the end it works the same for the winner, the big bucks and the record deal.”

“Holy crap,” Chuck said, obviously trying to picture it.

Pike said, “So all’s I need from you is your agreement, on the dotted line, and we’re almost good to go . . . What this is, you’re agreeing that PK Wizard Productions has you locked up for six months, or the duration of the show, whichever is longer.”

“So you’re saying,” Chuck said, getting a little of the old cockyness back, or at least trying to pretend it, “if another fellow like you were liable to come along, I have to tell him I’m tied up.”

“Essentially, yes. At least anyone representing another network.”

Pike let it hang, and Chuck looked like a pile of pudding standing there in a hockey suit, not exactly the tough guy that liked to push women around.

He wasn’t *entirely* stupid, and he did pick up one thing. “You said, we’re *almost* good to go . . .” he said.

“That’s right,” Pike said. “What I’ll need from you now, is an accapella version of something.”

“A *who*?” Chuck said.

“One verse is fine, plus chorus and bridge. Anything you want.”

“You want me to *sing* something? Right here on the street?”

“It’s routine, but it’s policy, I’m afraid . . . We need to confirm your abilities before we commit on our end.”

“Oh,” Chuck said, “you mean like you got scouts and stuff, reporting back to you? That’s what you’re going on?”

“Exactly,” Pike said. He hadn’t thought of that, but that was a clever explanation.

Meanwhile Chuck was clearing his throat and licking his lips, getting ready to perform, since he could see there was no way out of it if he wanted to be in Boise.

After about two notes, probably anything out of his mouth would have been bad, Pike realized, but on top of that, he picked the worst song. It was ‘Love Yourself’ by Justin Bieber.

Pike couldn’t stand that one. It was one of those they played on the radio about every 10 minutes, and they even made a faster version out of it, so you were subjected to it *double* the amount.

The ridiculous lyrics stuck in your head, sometimes for several hours, trapping you.

And if you think . . . that I’m . . . still holding on, then . . . you should go and love yourself.

Chuck belted them out, and a few people walking by looked around and kept going.

Pike had figured he better have the guy qualify, not just *hand* him the audition, so it would look more official. He also wanted to make Chuck stand there and embarrass himself, but that wasn’t as important.

But either way, this ‘song’, if you could call it that, was very hard to deal with, and Pike decided there should have been some other way to make the guy qualify.

At any rate, Chuck finally finished, making sure to hold the final note, and Pike said that’s what they were looking for, and to sign right here.

He gave Chuck a copy of the contract and told him he’d see him Thursday night at 8 in Boise, and the address was on the paperwork.

Pike had made it the address of a big commercial office building, not including any suite number, just telling Chuck they were leasing office space for the night and that he’d meet him in the lobby at 8.

They shook hands once again, *and boy was Chuck for sure going to be there*, when Pike thought of something and a flash of panic set in.

“How long’s it take you to get to Boise . . . I mean normally?” Pike said as casually as possible.

“Right around 3 and half,” Chuck said. “I tend to drive fast. Others, their mileage can vary.” And he laughed at his own joke.

Pike was working it over. The guy would hang around say at least a half hour before giving up, and then if he needed a nightcap back home at *Robinson’s* . . . which he easily might, after getting run up like that . . . that would put him back there at . . . right around midnight, earliest scenario.

If all that *did* miraculously happen to go that way . . . would he have made it back in time to *still* buy Dani that drink?

Ho-ly Toledo.

Pike tried to mentally take a step away from it, to look at it clearly, and he concluded that was awful unlikely, it being a school night and all, that Dani and her girlfriend would be hanging around that late.

In all likelihood. But . . .

“Did I say 8?” Pike said. “I meant 9 . . . You’re in Division 2. So I’ll see you in the lobby at 9, this Thursday . . . the 3rd, November . . . 3 days from right now . . . We on the same page?”

Chuck said they were, and he was already crossing off where he’d written 8 on his contract, and writing in 9, and Pike felt better.

“Okay then,” Pike said, and they shook hands for a *third* time, which was rough, and Chuck went back toward the bar and Pike headed the other way, not knowing where he was going but to hopefully put the whole nine yards behind him.

It was awkward at this hour to have to stop someone and ask them to help you call an Uber or cab, though friendly as most of them were it probably would have been fine, but after a block-and-a-half there was a little plexi-glass enclosed station on a corner, and Pike read the sign and it was the bus that went to Pocatello, and a few minutes later there it was. The only thing, which Pike didn’t realize, it was 75 cents and you needed exact, the driver didn’t make change it said, and Pike didn’t have any change on him but the driver waved him through and said don’t worry about it.

You had to walk about a half mile from where the bus dropped you to the Super 8, and that was fine, it gave him a chance to think. Well . . . was there anything else? He couldn’t come up with anything, and now the question was, do you try to return to Palm Springs right now, or do you spend another night in the room since you paid for it anyway?

He got here yesterday afternoon, which meant he'd used up an hour of Palm Springs time, plus another hour for the overflow, so what difference did it make? Stay over, take a darn hot tub, stuff your face at breakfast--you're still only losing 2 hours either way.

There was too much he didn't understand about this business, and like so many of these quirks you ran into, it just wasn't worth it to try to justify them or figure them out . . . so forget it.

Which he did a good job of the rest of the night, and the mountain air did its job again as well, and Pike woke fresh as a daisy.

After breakfast he found an old abandoned watershed tunnel, not far from the motel actually, halfway up the hill and then 50 yards down a fire trail, and he wasn't sure it would qualify as a structure, but he sat down in there and there was a little more herky-jerk than normal, but soon enough he was across the street and up the block from *Ida's Country Kitchen*.

Every time he made it back . . . even though that part was proving more and more routine . . . it kind of felt like you just survived a football game in the NFL, or a war in a strange foreign country where you were a soldier and *thank God* you made it out okay.

However you looked at it, it sure was a relief.

Chapter 26

Pike tapped Jack on the shoulder, and a real *sunburned* one by now he noticed, and said, “Welp. We really should be getting the show on the road.”

Jack had his sunglasses on and casually pulled them down to see what was going on, with the attitude, Pike thinking, of a rich guy on vacation being bothered by someone inconsequential.

Jack said, “Ya think?”

Pike said, “I looked it up, it’s around 4 hours to Phoenix, and they’re a little north of there, so . . . yeah.”

Luckily it wasn’t that late. He’d gotten off easy, in a way, in Pocatello, since he’d first assumed he’d have stay until at least Thursday night, but now, with only 2 hours missing, it was only quarter to one.

The funny thing, much as he didn’t like dealing with that country club, he tried hard to arrive there coming back, since he was still a little spooked from the outbound, finding himself on the shoulder of that freeway, which turned out to be a major one, Interstate 15. But he was here now, and in one piece, so no point obsessing over it.

What Pike had done five minutes ago before tapping Hannamker on the shoulder was check Dani’s room, which was the moment of truth.

There was no answer for a minute, and then a guy with a sleeveless t-shirt and a beer belly opens the door looking dumbfounded and scratching his rear end, and Pike excused himself for having the wrong room and moved on.

So Pike continued with Jack now, “And that 4 hours could be longer, since don’t forget we’re dealing with Friday of Christmas weekend. All hell could break loose on the roads.”

“Jeez, you’re right,” Jack said. He didn’t seem as eager to stick around as he had, and Pike wondered if there’d been some issue with Dani while he was gone.

Speaking of which . . . “Where’s Dani?” Jack said. “We should say goodbye, thank her and everything . . . Tell you the truth, I haven’t seen her for a couple hours.”

“I just checked the room,” Pike said, “she’s not feeling well. She sends her best . . . This time I think it’s real too, not a *fake* not-feeling-well like with Arnold.”

“Shute, hate to not see her . . . That is *some* fine lady. Though I’m telling you what you already know, right?” Looking at Pike with the dumb half-smile, waiting for a reaction.

“Not a problem . . . all’s we do, is catch her on the way back,” Pike lied.

“Hey yeah, forgot about that,” Jack said, a little more fired up now. “Fair enough then.” And he finally started moving his ass out of the recliner, and when it dawned on him and he asked *what about our stuff*, Pike said he’d taken care of it, don’t worry about every little detail so much, and to get in the *damn truck*.

Jack complied, but as he was strapping on his seatbelt he said, “The good thing about getting an early start . . .”

“Not early, but *relatively* early,” Pike said.

“Fine . . . is if we have to stop and eat before necessarily going too far, it doesn’t screw us up that bad.”

Pike said, “You remember your job? Since yesterday? . . . Which is to basically mind your own business. And let me be the one to decide when it’s time to eat, and so forth. You got that straight?”

“I got it boss,” Jack said, “it’s up to you.”

“What’d you have in mind though?” Pike said

Traffic wasn’t bad so far, and maybe it wouldn’t be, since holiday stuff was unpredictable and you’d drive yourself crazy trying to assume who would logically be going which way at what time. They’d found a roadside hole-in-the wall about a half hour outside of Palm Springs, and the owner was a talkative guy and a ham radio buff, and there were two big antenna towers out past the parking lot.

Pike figured what can it hurt and asked the guy if he’d ever seen any UFO’s out here. The guy answered, no, not in the daytime that he could ever recall, but at night, *you bet*.

Without missing a beat, Jack surprised Pike by saying to the guy, “You’re in a good spot for ‘em out here . . . You use infared too?”

“Nothing that fancy,” the guy said. “You pick up enough with the naked eye. Especially in the winter.”

“That makes sense,” Jack said. “It must get real brisk and clear some nights, huh?”

The guy nodded. “It puts on a show for you,” he said, and went to refill someone’s coffee.

Pike said to Jack, “Since when do *you* believe in that shit?”

“Since whenever. It makes more sense that we got ‘em than we don’t . . . Plus you have people like Aaron Rodgers now, saying they saw stuff.”

Pike didn’t say anything, but of course he read about that too, Rodgers, the Green Bay Packers Superbowl quarterback swearing he saw something while driving cross-country with a bunch of old Cal teammates.

“The Rodgers sighting,” Jack continued, “four fighter jets come zooming by shortly after, chasing the thing.”

“Gee, you say the *Rodgers* sighting, like you’re some kinda expert and it’s only one of the many.”

Jack said, “All’s you do, spend a little time on YouTube . . . You might not be so cynical.”

Pike left it alone, and they got back on the road, Jack taking over the driving this time and Pike trying to get a little sleep.

Everything was fine until they were about an hour outside of Phoenix, when Jack said, “Dog, you know that Andrea girl right?”

“Yeah?” Pike said, waking up and right away regretting it.

“Well, it turns out she wanted to come down . . . So I figured you wouldn’t mind, we have to pick her up at the airport.”

“Wait a second,” Pike said. “Today?”

“Well not *today* . . . I mean not right this minute or anything . . . but like, *tonight*.”

“*Wait* a second,” Pike said. “You’re not talking *Andrea* . . . Anthony’s girlfriend?”

“You know more than one of them suddenly?” Jack said.

“Well hold on a second . . . what about *him*?”

“It kind of . . . didn’t work out, according to her.”

“So . . . she just happens to be free then, nothing else to do at Christmas?”

“Sort of *it*, yeah.”

“I’m not believing this,” Pike said.

“Yeah, I thought that might be your reaction . . . but it shouldn’t hurt anything. When you take a step away, and put it in perspective . . . Right?”

Pike was thinking back now, Jack coming in that night in a bad mood, about to crash on the couch, except things livened back up with Anthony and Andrea showing up, and then Foxe and Cathy just happening to drop in, and after a while Jack was ready to fight someone in The Box, though he couldn't remember now if it was Foxe or Anthony . . . or both . . . and he wondered if that had anything to do with this new development . . . But it wasn't worth trying to replay the whole scene in his head and figure it out.

"What time then?" Pike said.

"Not til about 9:30. She's coming on Southwest."

"Hmm . . . meaning . . . we'll have to kill a couple hours at least."

"What?" Jack said. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No reason. Except I hear they have some good steak places in Phoenix."

"I wouldn't know. A little over my head this trip, to be honest."

"And the good part," Pike said, "you're paying."

"Dude, you gotta be *kidding*."

"Fine, pull over."

"Ah c'mon man . . . you wouldn't dump me off *again*, would you? You're not *that* cruel."

Pike didn't say anything and stared straight ahead, and waited until Jack understood the concept, and then he started checking Yelp reviews of steakhouses in the greater Phoenix area.

Chapter 27

Last night had been a little awkward, to say the least. Pike finally got a hold of Mitch and actually confirmed that not only was he coming, but he was *here*, and to make matters interesting had a couple people with him, one of them female.

You had to hand it to Mitch, for an old guy he went with the flow pretty well, and instead of being mad about the short notice and excess company (not to mention, Pike probably woke him up) he said come on by and we'll figure it out, and he gave Pike directions.

It had also been pretty weird driving up there, the half hour from the Phoenix airport to Anthem, with Hannamaker and Andrea cuddled up next to him, but what could you do.

Mitch had it pretty well figured out when they got there, and had set up an extra cot and a camping pad in his place, and said Lucy was looking forward to putting up Andrea at her place, which was probably a lie, since Lucy needed to be hit with that at 11 o'clock at night like a hole in the head, but it all worked out.

The plan today, if you could believe it, was Lucy was making a Christmas Eve dinner, which was more of an afternoon deal actually, and they were all invited at 2.

Jack checked with Andrea when they got up, and she was doing fine and seemed to be getting along nicely with Lucy and was helping her with the dinner.

Jack and Mitch were hitting it off pretty well too.

Pike was starting to feel like the odd man out, frankly, and he excused himself, though Mitch and Jack barely noticed, and took a little walk.

Where Mitch rented his little apartment--and by the way, a continued no-mention of his actual *wife*, Melinda--it was a planned community where everything was 100 percent artificial, which was how he pictured Lucy's as well, a couple miles away, but it all sort of agreed with Pike.

You had incredible manicured lawns, flowers all over the place, giant swimming pools, walking and biking trails with various markers about every 10 feet so you wouldn't get lost, and the whole shebang framed in the background by mountains full of red rock.

He wrestled with it for a while, walked about a quarter mile, and finally pulled out his phone and called Dani.

“Hey there,” she said, certainly *sounding* okay, and Pike hoped everything *was* okay.

“Hey yourself,” he said. “I was just . . . wishing you a Merry Christmas . . . and also making sure Marcus was the last guy you killed.”

“Ex-cuse me?”

Pike said, “I could sugarcoat it a different way . . . but, yeah, that *really* is why I called.”

Dani said, “If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you have a lot of nerve . . . Pike, that’s simply not funny . . . and not something to joke about.”

“What about Chuck?” he said.

“What about *who* now?”

“Guy named *Chuck*. Who you’ve been dating.”

“Okay, now I’m wondering if you’re okay.”

“You can tell me. I’m not going to crucify you for having another boyfriend.”

“Pike, it’s been real . . . I’d ask you if you’re doing anything for Christmas, but I’m a little insulted at the moment.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve kind of been down in Palm Springs.”

“Gosh, what brings you down *there*? Is it a family vacation?”

Pike said, “You might say that,” and wished her well and said goodbye.

Hmm. That wasn’t bad. Not at all. He’d thrown her enough curve balls to where he was pretty dang convinced there’d been no Chuck. Which for now at least, meant no second homicide on the horizon.

Not that the first one was likely a homicide, but even so.

What he was still worried about unfortunately though, despite this encouraging confirmation, was one of the *Laws* kicking in somehow, and her meeting Chuck anyway, and one thing leading to another, and who knows, them taking a long weekend to Palm Springs in, say, *March* or something.

Which you couldn’t control, Pike realized that. He’d done his best. And for now, he could relax and enjoy a little holiday spirit in the great southwest.

Couldn’t he?

You would think . . . Except it would be nice to make sure . . . for your good old-fashioned piece of mind, before you sat down to a turkey dinner or whatever was coming out

of the oven . . . that all parts of this cocamanied story fit together . . . and then you *could* relax like everyone else.

So he googled **Charles Kolskie Pocatello Blackfoot**.

And *boom*.

Up top on the search results was an article from the Pocatello *Daily Register*, dated **Friday, November 4th, 2016**. It read:

Pocatello Man Fatally Injured in Overnight Collision That Claims the Life of Nampa Woman

A highway collision Thursday night east of Boise claimed the lives of a Pocatello man and a Nampa woman.

Charles Kolskie, 32, was travelling eastbound on I-84 at approximately 10:45 pm when he struck a stopped vehicle occupied by 74-year-old Wilma Gallyo of Nampa, police said.

The accident occurred approximately 6 miles west of the town of Mountain Home, with both parties succumbing to their injuries by the time emergency personnel arrived, authorities said.

Mrs. Gallyo had reportedly been a passenger in a car driven by her husband Nestor, 76, when he began to experience nausea and pulled onto the shoulder and got out, leaving Mrs. Gallyo in the vehicle.

Neither alcohol nor excessive speed appear to have been a factor, police said.

Kolskie was a union steamfitter and had been employed by Lincoln Bid Construction for the past four years, a company spokesperson said.

Son . . . of . . . a . . . bitch.

On a stick.

Damn it.

Now what?

It was quarter to 11, they were going to eat in 3 hours. That would give him 3 days back in Blackfoot to straighten this mess out.

And if he didn't make it back on time, what could you do . . . you couldn't let this stand.

Unbelievable. If the guy wants to run off the road and kill himself, that's one thing. In the end, he's no worse off than he was after Dani got through with him in that hot tub . . . And the good thing, he *for sure* wouldn't have met Dani after *that*.

Except now he had to go and take an innocent person with him . . .

The biggest problem now, the immediate one, was coming up with a departure point ASAP.

You had this community made up of these planned *mini-communities* that had sprung up in the desert, and most everything looked brand-spanking new, which obviously meant nothing looked old.

Off in the distance, to what Pike thought was the east, though he was a little turned around, was what appeared to be a rare ranch.

A farmhouse circa 1970's, shaded by a grove of trees, plus there were cattle, horses, and some outbuildings that you couldn't tell how old they were.

But off to the left, an old dilapidated barn. No question about that thing being too young.

From this little vantage point on the manicured walking trail of Mitch's complex, it was a couple miles away at least, but the biggest problem was you had to go cross-country from here for most of it, until finally as you got close you hit the service road that took you to the ranch turnoff.

Oh boy.

This meant vaulting over the little retaining wall on the property, and then heading across desert, no other way to look at it, pointing toward that paved service road way off in the distance.

Pike was wearing a baggy swim suit and a t-shirt, along with loafers and no sox. You could go back to Mitch's, waste time, explain yourself, change into something hardier . . . or you could take care of this *right now*, before the damage you did back there, which was currently scrambling his brain big-time, had even another minute to take hold.

So Pike took off, over the wall and into the thorns and cactus and lizards and scorpions and rattlesnakes and whatever else, and when he got to the road he looked around and didn't see any cars or people either direction who would notice him moving at extreme high speed, so he threw it into gear and hung a right at the ranch and right away crossed a metal cattle guard, wondering *am I going to have to outrun any loose bulls now too?*

But luckily everything was quiet, no bulls, no dogs, no humans . . . and the big old barn was what it looked like, not quite falling down but definitely abandoned at this point, and he went into one of the old horse stalls and worked harder this time than last, trying like heck to visualize Utah State, the campus, the stadium, the recruiting trip . . . and also throwing Halloween into the mix . . . but either way the last thing he could afford to do was land on that interstate again, and the familiar business began again soon enough.

And there was like a cloud of dust this time and he swung his head around and saw that he was back on the interstate, cars whooshing by like before, except he realized he was on the *opposite* shoulder now, everybody heading south toward Salt Lake City.

Pike had an instinctive feeling that he'd get picked up again before too long, except he'd have to cross over, to be going back *north*, and he could make out, way down there, an overpass, and unfortunately this was going to require doing some more running, which was starting to get *real old*.

But he'd gone less than a mile when a car pulled over, and miraculously . . . though Pike knew once again that nothing in this altered stuff was truly *miraculous* . . . it was Eva and Dave.

Pike got in, and they *knew* him . . . which was even more bizarre . . . and they asked what in God's name he was doing here *again*?

Then it started making some sense, and he asked what day it was and they said it was Monday, and Pike said a *Halloween* Monday? And they said the *one and only*.

The reason there was a semi-logic to things now is Eva and Dave *would* know him, that's true, since they picked him up the first time on Sunday, the day before.

So *yeah, okay*, that part would still be intact. Naturally, it wasn't all quite the same, as Eva now had the cast, this time a pink one on her wrist, and Dave was fine and driving.

Not surprisingly, *she* was the basketball player this time and got hurt in a scrimmage last week and was in a bad mood, and Dave was the most happy-go-lucky dude around.

In any case, they drove south a few miles and then conferred among themselves, and next thing Dave got off at Exit 121a and turned it around and starting heading back north toward Pokey.

"What just happened?" Pike said.

"Ah, we cut out at lunch today," Dave said. "Half the school is. We were going to the mall in Salt Lake. But now it doesn't make as much sense . . . We'll take you back to the Super 8 . . . or wherever."

“Gee thanks,” Pike said. “On account of me, you’re turning around?” Not knowing exactly how it worked, except that it wasn’t as *simple* as all that.

“Not on account of you, no,” Dave said. “So you don’t have to feel guilty or nothing . . . What it is, she forgot something she had to do for her mom.”

Yeah right, Pike thought. “Either way,” he said, “you’re helping me out.”

“You ever find that Robinson’s place I was telling you about? Where I heard they do Karaoke? If I have the right joint.”

Pike said, “As a matter of fact I did. And I’m going back up there tonight.”

Dave laughed and Eva laughed a little, not much, clearly ticked off about her wrist and having to miss a bunch of games. Dave said, “Well don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” And they didn’t say much more until they were back in Pocatello and Pike was getting out, and he reminded them again he’d probably be in Arizona at Christmas and to come on down.

They said they’d keep it in mind, and they got out of there, Pike figuring they were convinced for sure now, the second time around, that he was totally off his rocker.

He’d been thinking if there was an alternate way to handle it. One way would be to go out to Nampa (he’d looked it up, it was a suburb of Boise) and derail the old couple so they weren’t on the road the same time as the asshole, and there wouldn’t be a collision. Maybe.

But that’d be a lot of work, even if you could pull it off--and you’d still have to make your appearance with Chuck and sell him on the fake audition.

So try to keep it simple, and maybe you could tweak something and get lucky.

Pike took a cab to Kinko’s, went through the phony document routine again, and took another one back up to *Robinson’s*. It was around 5:30 by this time and he went in and had a burger, and it wasn’t too crowded yet but you could feel the place bracing for the Halloween onslaught.

The Hispanic kid busboy was running around, already working hard, and Pike hoped he wouldn’t need him this time, but you never knew what Chuck might come in dressed as.

Sure enough, close to nine a hockey player comes lumbering in . . . same dumb walk . . . and, not throwing anyone out of the way exactly but not worrying too much about it either, forces his way up to the bar.

This time the idiot was a New York Rangers’ goalie.

Pike again questioned the logic of that, since you had the Colorado Avalanche in the league now, plus so many other teams closer than New York or Boston.

But whatever . . . Pike waited until it felt right, went up to the guy and gave him the speech, most of it right there at the bar this time, and then with Chuck once-again googley-eyed, got him outside and up to the corner and told him he needed that audition song, just to make sure he really qualifies.

It was a little strange, because this time Chuck was less hesitant to start singing, and didn't stall and question the need for this, right here on the street, like he did last time.

"I don't mind," Chuck said. "Any particular style of music y'all prefer?"

Saying *y'all* now, which he hadn't before, but Pike had to keep reminding himself that was how this worked.

Pike was going to let him pick what he wanted, hoping it at least wouldn't be the Justin Bieber song this time, but then he thought of something.

"Actually," he said, "can you make it a Christmas song?"

"In October?" Chuck said. "You for real?"

"Yeah, well, you never know," Pike said. "It can't hurt to spread a little good will around . . . Regardless."

Chuck was trying to come up with one, it seemed like, and he said, "I hear you, I do . . . how about . . . 'Some Children See Him'?"

Pike had never heard of it but told Chuck that would be fine, and to go ahead.

It was a surprisingly slow, almost mournful song, and when Chuck launched into a second verse after the chorus Pike had to concentrate to avoid slightly tearing up.

It was the song, not Chuck, but Chuck was actually halfway decent on it, much as it killed Pike to admit it, and a group of people stopped and listened. When it was over, there was polite applause, and one guy shook Chuck's hand.

"Well that was kind of wild," Chuck said, after the little audience had scattered.

"It was," Pike said. "The holidays bring out the best in people."

"Maybe so . . . So we all set? Thursday night? Anything else?"

"There is," Pike said. "What *time* did I tell you?"

"You said 8," Chuck said.

"Well that should be good," Pike said.

"You sure? Looks like you're thinking about something."

"100 percent . . . See you in the lobby. Drive carefully and don't be late."

Chuck mumbled something about appreciating the opportunity, and went back into the bar, and there was a taxi dropping some people off and Pike didn't fool around this time with a bus, and got in.

Of course he *wasn't* 100 percent sure about the 8 o'clock business.

But that was the original time last time, until he'd gotten fancy and changed it 9 at the last minute.

The reasoning had been, if the doofus turned around quick enough after realizing he'd been double-crossed and made it back to *Robinson's* at a reasonable hour, he might still meet Dani that night.

But that was a chance you had to take, given what happened to Mrs. Gallyo.

Pike got out of the cab at the Super 8, not to stay overnight this time but to use that facility he'd discovered up the hill and into the brush and down that fire trail. Pocatello was a relatively old town, a railroad town actually, and there were plenty of other locations that would probably work, but this was a proven one, so why fool around.

Once again, you had the abandoned watershed tunnel, though at night now, and everything felt different, and Pike hoped it was still abandoned, meaning no homeless in there, or animals, or much water. He had his phone with him this time and one thing it *was* good for was the flashlight, and he found his way down the trail, made a bunch of noise just in case, and went inside and took care of business.

Chapter 28

Lucy's place was pleasant. She lived in a complex called Palm Breeze Manor that, now that Pike was looking around, was quite a bit nicer than where Mitch was holing up.

More importantly, Lucy was a nice person. Perky and upbeat and pretty darn agile for someone in her mid-60's, and Pike could understand why Mitch probably had a thing for her.

She said she was going to her son's tomorrow, in Phoenix, where some of the grandkids were, and her daughter from New Jersey and the rest of them were coming in as well.

But she announced that today she was thrilled to be able to entertain all these unexpected guests.

Pike was thinking *this is one special lady*, but . . . he knew he needed to clear the decks, and he excused himself for what he prayed would be the final time this Christmas, and walked out behind the tennis courts where he had a little privacy, to check in with Dani.

Before he called her he looked at his messages and there was one from good old Frankie, simply wishing him a Merry Christmas, no other news attached . . . And another from Dave, the Idaho guy, saying he and Eva decided to come to Arizona after all, and they were on their way and it would be fun to hang out if he remembered them and really was there.

What do you know.

The conversation with Dani was almost identical to before . . . which was actually earlier today . . . the only difference being, Dani hung up on him this time when he over-did it, calling him a jerk first.

But that was fine. Same result, like this morning, pretty convincing that she'd never met the guy.

Now for the moment of truth, Part 2.

Charles Kolskie was again in the search results, but this time only once, for donating 5 cases of Sunkist Orange Soda to a Kiwanis Club charity barbeque in 2014.

Pike searched it again, just to be safe, making sure he spelled everything right, and there it was once more, just as tame.

He sat down in one of the outdoor chairs and put his head back.

After a couple minutes he got up and came back inside, and Lucy was serving these amazing-looking appetizers and Andrea was helping her. Jack and Mitch were in an energetic discussion, and a game was on.

Dinner was equally amazing, right down to the homemade wild berry pie, Pike thinking how the heck did Lucy have time for *that*?

Then they sat in the living room and it was getting dark out, and some Christmas music came on, a choir, and Jack was kind of paired up with Andrea now, and Mitch and Lucy were together as well.

Lucy's friend Gertrude, from one of the other apartments, had stopped by for dessert, and now she was sitting by herself on one of the couches, so Pike joined her.

"So what do you think?" he said. "Should we go play some Christmas pickleball?"

Gertrude laughed. "You're an amusing young man," she said. "I've been observing you."

"Oh boy. Hopefully I haven't done anything wrong then."

"So far, you've been a model citizen," Gertrude said.

"Stick around," Pike said.

THE END

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