

Time Lapse

by REX BOLT



**Pike Gillette
Time Travel Book 2**

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Chapter 1

Beacon, California

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Well, what could you do for an encore?

Pike didn't know the answer to that, but when he woke up Sunday morning he called Audrey and asked her how she felt about taking a drive to Manhattan Beach.

"Gosh," she said, "what is it, like three hours each way?"

"Give or take," Pike said. "It's a relaxing drive, not bad at all, until you hit traffic."

"I see . . . well what would we *do*? Go swimming you mean? The beach?"

Pike figured it might be a little chilly for that, this time of year, though he remembered it was about a month ago when he raced into the ocean down there to help some people in trouble, and hadn't worried about the water temperature.

"I was thinking more, have lunch, walk around," he said. "We might drop in on Mitch."

"I'm game," Audrey said.

"Just like that?" Pike said. "No having to take a minute to consider the pros and cons?"

"Nope," she said, "just give me a half hour."

Past Bakersfield Audrey said, "Now Mitch is the gentleman I met right? At your house?"

Pike said, "Yeah he rang the bell . . . Unfortunately. No notice at all, he just shows up from L.A."

It was hard to believe that was only a week ago. It was an understatement to say that a lot had happened since then.

"I really liked him," Audrey said. "He was so genuine."

"He liked you too. He kept carrying on about it when you left . . . On the one hand, maybe it wasn't the worst thing that he popped in right then."

"No, it wasn't," she said. Mitch had unintentionally interrupted an awful situation, with Audrey informing Pike that her late mom had been having an affair with his dad.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a few miles. Then Audrey said, “Well I brought my swimsuit.”

“You mean . . . just a bikini?” he said. Trying to sound casual.

“Oh you,” she said, smiling, reaching over and playing with his hair. “It’s one of those lite wetsuits you use for water skiing.”

“Ah.”

“We used to make family trips up to Lake Almanor, that’s where I learned . . . Sorry to disappoint you.”

“No, no, don’t be ridiculous,” he lied. “This is great by the way, thanks for coming.”

“Well thank *you* for twisting my arm . . . I’m not ashamed to say it, this is what the doctor ordered.”

“I agree,” Pike said. “Sometimes you can’t beat a change of scenery.” Thinking about *his* change of scenery from yesterday. *Unexpectedly out there in Utah*. When all he’d been trying to do was arrive at his own high school football field, a couple hundred feet away.

Traffic was light until they got to around Magic Mountain and then it crawled terribly. When they reached Santa Monica, Pike couldn’t take it anymore and got off on Wilshire Boulevard, which meant the long way to Manhattan Beach, but at least you were moving.

“Like I said,” he said, “a relaxing drive until you hit traffic.”

“It doesn’t bother me a bit,” Audrey said. “It’s wonderful to experience new places, even at a slow pace.”

Pike wondered, was there anything he *didn’t* like about this person?

In Marina del Rey, at the intersection where you make the turn toward El Segundo, two drivers were getting into it. First one guy, then the other one gets out of their car.

The were in each other’s faces pointing fingers and their cars were sitting there idling, blocking the right lane. People were honking, but the two doofuses didn’t care.

Pike waited until they’d endured two green lights without being able to move.

He said to Audrey, “Excuse me just a minute, I’ll be right back.”

He threw it into Park and got out. One guy had a jean jacket on, and Pike thought that would work, and he grabbed the guy by the front of it and spun him around and in one sweeping motion slammed the guy head-first back into his car and closed the door.

Pike turned his attention to other guy, who got the idea quick and hustled back into his own car and got the hell out of there, and by the time Pike got back in the pickup the first guy

was gone too, and traffic was moving again, and some of the drivers were giving Pike a thumbs-up out their windows.

“Sorry about that,” he said to Audrey, “but it’s so disrespectful when they pull stuff like that . . . I mean they’re acting like there’s no one else around.”

“WOW,” Audrey said.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s fine . . . I’m quite impressed actually . . . I just didn’t know you had it in you.”

“It wasn’t what you think, I wasn’t really all that angry . . . It was more an act.” Hoping she wasn’t going to judge him differently now.

“You should be in the movies, or something,” she said, and she looked at him a certain way, and Pike felt like everything was okay.

Chapter 2

“The good thing about this place,” Mitch was saying, “is you can get breakfast 24 hours a day.”

Pike and Audrey had met him at the usual spot, The Kettle, and with traffic, plus the other small delay, it was around 1 by the time they got there and Pike was starved.

“You ever cook for this character?” Mitch said to Audrey.

“I haven’t,” Audrey said, smiling. “I’d like to though.”

“Well if you do,” Mitch said, “you need to throw portion-control out the window . . . Last time he was here, he’d just scarfed down a major meal and then some, and we go see this guy, which takes, what, maybe a half hour, and we finish with that, and right away he’s ravenous again.”

“What person did you have to meet?” Audrey said.

Pike kicked Mitch under the table.

“It was pretty dull, the whole thing,” Mitch said. “It wasn’t important, it turned out.”

Audrey said, “But Pike drove all the way down to help you meet this person?”

Pike cleared his throat. “It’s football-related, basically . . . Mitch is helping me decide where . . . and if . . . I want to continue playing next year . . . In fact did you know Mitch played at Michigan State?”

“Yes, but you’re overstating it,” Mitch said, glad to change the subject. “The atmosphere was very rudimentary back then, compared to today.”

“Well I’d never try to tell anyone what to do,” she said, “but I saw a few of our games, and everyone says it, he has talent.” Sliding over in the booth and resting her head on Pike’s shoulder.

“So do you,” Mitch said to Audrey.

“What does *that* mean?” Pike said.

“It means, she’s a charming young woman, not to mention beautiful . . . An old guy like me, I can get away with saying that. If I were 35 it would be different . . . You’ll see what I mean someday.”

“How about we take a walk,” Pike said.

They took a look at the ocean and the day was slightly overcast, not much warmth, and the water didn't look inviting at all.

But Audrey said she wanted to go in, and there were changing rooms up on the front of the pier and soon she was all set.

"Okay now what I'll do," Pike said, "is I'll stand right at the water's edge. Me and Mitch. You signal us if there's any issue at all . . . Does that work?"

"You're funny," she said, and she took a running start and a moment later dived under a wave and was in.

"Jesus, look at her out there," Mitch said, "she's a fish."

Pike had to admit, it was pretty impressive. She knew how to bodysurf, and was catching medium-sized waves and riding them part way in, and then as they began to fizzle out she'd do a flip turn and head back out for the next one.

He said to Mitch, "Yeah, you never know, people surprise you with talents you wouldn't expect."

There were some surfers to the right of where Audrey was, and a few little kids frolicking in the whitewater in front of her. She looked like she was having so much fun, and whatever guilt Pike felt in dragging her down here was eased.

Mitch said, "Welp . . . Now for the main event, which I'm dying to hear about . . . More than I can ever tell you."

"What main event?" Pike said.

Mitch frowned. "Oh, then . . . I just assumed . . . since you came all the way here . . . that you had something to say to me. Face to face."

"I got you now," Pike said. "You need to speak English, I can't always follow you . . . Yeah, what we talked about, I did it."

For a moment Mitch's eyes looked like they were going to bulge out of his skull, and he dropped down to one knee in the sand.

"Why are you shocked?" Pike said. "You told me all along, you thought I could do it. That it was possibly part of my bizarre . . . endowment."

"Please tell me about it," Mitch said, very quietly.

"Fine . . . What I did first, I tried to come up with a quiet place, but also a familiar one . . . as my . . . starting point."

"Good thinking . . . Stay in your comfort zone, then."

“So I picked a spot at school. I doubt it mattered, but I also made sure the dang place was constructed before 1956, like you warned me.”

“I didn’t warn you, I just thought it would be prudent . . . then what?”

“Then miraculously, I was able to put myself in a relaxed state . . . Like I read about it the book.”

“Beautiful. The psychic element, then . . . Exactly what the Russians were working so studiously on, back in the ‘60s.”

“I felt good . . . hard to explain, but I was in a zone . . . but something told me that might be *it*, that beyond that, nothing abnormal was going to happen.”

“Except then it did,” Mitch said.

“Yeah. There was a brief spinning that crept on me . . . not going to go into the details, but then something kind of shook and I was there . . . if you can believe it.”

“Where is *there*?”

“That was the problem,” Pike said. “I screwed up on that . . . ended up out-of-state.”

“Ho-ly Toledo,” Mitch said. “You’re shitting me.”

“Jeez. Why do keep being so surprised? What, you were pretending the whole time, when you encouraged me?”

“I don’t know what I was doing, frankly,” Mitch said. “Right now, I’m simply blown away.”

“You want to know if I made it back then?”

“Yes . . . please . . . I mean you obviously made it, but was there any . . . issue?”

“Not really. I went pre-1956 on the other end too, and more or less reversed it . . . In both cases I got the day right but fucked up the location.”

Pike made sure he was keeping an eye on Audrey out there. She was still catching waves, and hadn’t slowed down a bit.

Mitch was rubbing his chin. He said, “I’m just going to play devil’s advocate here.”

“Uh-oh,” Pike said.

“Is it possible you just dreamed your travel? . . . That you were in an acutely heightened state of awareness? And thus you felt certain you were there . . . when you may not have been?”

“I’m not believing this,” Pike said. But he found himself running back through it, replaying it in his mind.

“To expand on it a bit,” Mitch said, “were you somewhere you’d never been? Or were you familiar with your surroundings?”

“Familiar with them,” Pike said.

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m in no way trying to downplay your accomplishment.”

Pike felt confusion creeping in and his energy draining. He sat down on the beach.

“Anyhow,” Mitch said, “something to consider? Right?”

Pike took a while to answer. “All right, what you’re saying,” he said, “I can see where you’re coming from. And I’m just mixed up enough now that I could almost agree with you . . . Except . . . on the return trip, I had to walk from Audrey’s house back to school.”

“Interesting,” Mitch said. “You sure?”

“Damn straight I’m sure. In fact I had to stop and eat twice along the way.”

“Well, then,” Mitch said.

Audrey was coming in. Pike said, “We have to wrap this up. What it sounds like . . . very unfortunately, maybe to prove it to you and me both . . . I have to try it again. This time *change* some shit, so we know 100 percent for sure.”

“That’s very wise thinking, young man. Similar to a controlled experiment . . . Cause and effect.”

“So you tell *me*,” Pike said, “What would that *be*, that would need to be changed?”

Audrey was standing there now, talking a mile a minute about how great the waves had been, and to Pike’s surprise she peeled off her water skiing wetsuit or whatever it was, and sure enough underneath it was that bikini after all.

Pike stood up quickly and gave her a towel. Mitch was politely looking off toward the ocean, and Pike decided that was the right thing for him to do as well. What could you do?

Chapter 3

Audrey slept the first half of the drive back, and when she woke up she said, “So you see why I think you might be a secret agent or something?”

“Very funny,” Pike said.

“That man you guys met, that wasn’t a football person . . . was it.”

“No,” Pike said.

“And the reason we went today, what you had to talk over with Mitch, that wasn’t about football either, correct?”

Pike didn’t answer that.

“How’s your dad?” he said. “And how’s Hailey?”

“They’re as good as can be, thank you for asking. How’s yours?”

That was a rough question. Pike hadn’t confronted his dad on his relationship with Mrs. Milburn, and probably never would.

“It’s kind of what I was telling Mitch,” he said, “when you were out there in the water, so natural, looking like a million bucks. You think you know someone, but you don’t. There’s hidden shit.”

“You’re absolutely right. And often we don’t see it coming.”

Pike turned on the radio and they listened in silence for a while.

“What’s your favorite song?” he said.

“Gosh . . . there are hundreds,” she said. “I guess it depends on the day, and my mood . . . Right now at this moment? I’d say *Under the Bridge*.”

“Whoa. The Red Hot Chili Peppers. Good choice . . . Although did you know it’s supposedly about the guy using drugs?”

“Oh *no*. Really?”

“At least I think that’s one interpretation. But who cares, it’s a great song.”

“Have you ever . . . done drugs?” Audrey said.

“I’ve smoked a little weed . . . what about you?”

“No,” she said.

“Which was stupid on my part,” he said. “A party here and there, you know how it is, you think you’re supposed to.”

“What’s *your* favorite song?” she said.

“*Closing Time*, by Green Day.”

“Wow then, we both favor oldies apparently.”

“Okay I’m jumping around here,” Pike said. “Where did your parents meet?”

“Right in town. They were high school sweethearts.”

“I remember now. You told me they went to the old drive-in movie theater back in the day.”

“Hmm . . . I don’t remember that conversation, but yes, I’m sure they did.”

Oops. Pike realized that was *Cathy* who told him that about *her* parents. But anyhow . . .

Pike said, “And . . . how many years were they together, before you were born.”

“Let’s see. Well if I’m 18, and my dad’s 44 . . . so what’s that make it . . . About 8 years I guess. Why?”

“Did your parents ever live somewhere else, after they were married?”

“You mean different, like a different house? Or different city altogether?”

“Different city.”

“Uhm, well, yes, I’m a bit fuzzy on the details, but they spent a few years in Chico.”

“You’re talking Chico, California? Up toward Oregon?”

“Yeah, my dad had a job there for a while. I never asked them much about it . . . By the time I was born they were back here.”

“What’s he do now, your dad? I’m sorry, I should know that stuff.”

“No, that’s fine, why would you? He’s a regional manager for Enterprise, the car rental company . . . He’s on the road a lot, but mostly day trips.”

Pike said, “Dang, I don’t know why, but that’s completely surprising . . . And your mom? . . . Did she have a career?”

“Sort of. When Hailey and I were old enough she went back to the JC. Got her design credential . . . She worked part time out of the house.”

“So what years were they in Chico, do you know?”

“My,” Aubrey said, “you’re quite the interrogator all of a sudden.” She seemed mostly amused by it, not particularly upset.

“That’s my fault then,” Pike said. “I got a lot of thoughts racing . . . Unrelated stuff . . . random.”

“Well I’m not sure about the Chico years,” she said. “I suppose I could find out . . .

What else?”

“When they came back to Beacon after, did they move directly into your same house?”

“No. We lived on Blake Street when I was born.”

“Blake, over by the park?”

“Yes . . . Do you know that house that’s painted the wild colors?”

“With the palm trees?”

“Right next door to that, a little cracker box.”

“What years?”

“Goodness, you aren’t letting up, are you? . . . We moved right before Kindergarten, so .

. .”

“So, say 13 years. Which makes it 2003, give or take?”

“That sounds correct.”

Pike said, “Okay let me get this straight then . . . If your dad’s 44, that means they graduated from Hamilton in 1990 or so . . . they lived in Chico early to mid ‘90’s, then they moved to Blake Street, lived there late ‘90’s, early 2000’s, then your place ever since . . .

Right?’

They were on Highway 99 now, about a half hour from home. Audrey reached over and began massaging Pike’s shoulders.

“You’re a goofy boy,” she said. “I had no idea you were such a local history buff.”

“Well I like to keep this stuff straight,” he said. “Timelines and whatnot. It gives me perspective.”

“Perspective on *what*?”

“That’s a good question,” Pike said, and they laughed.

“But seeing as how this apparently is important,” Audrey said, “I’ll pin my dad down, and let you know.”

“I appreciate that . . . You sure today was okay for you? A lot of driving.”

“I’m sure,” she said. “The driving’s been almost as much fun as going in the ocean was.”

“Speaking of that . . .”

“Yes, speaking of that, you should have come in . . . although I understand how you’d be drained from football, and you just want a few weekends where you can take it easy. It must have been nice yesterday as well, not having anything you *had* to do . . . What *did* you do, anyhow?”

“Nothing interesting,” Pike said, thinking about the smell of the disinfectant in the custodian’s closet. “While we’re on the subject, you surprised me with the bikini there, at the end.”

“Is that so,” she said.

“Yeah. You notice, I didn’t stare too hard.”

“You could have,” she said.

“Oh,” Pike said.

Chapter 4

It was an odd feeling being back at school Monday, everything seemingly pretty normal and routine, *except for the one small detail that he'd time-traveled out of the son-of-a-bitch two days ago.*

At least he thought he had. Mitch had him questioning that now. Questioning his own sanity, is more what it was.

No way though he could have been mixed up on arriving on Aubrey's sidewalk. *Right?*

The thing to do, what he'd been dancing around, was he had to perform another *experiment*, as Mitch called it, and make something *happen*.

If he couldn't do that successfully, then to heck *with* it, this was all a bad dream. And a real dumb one.

What would you do though?

Pike obsessed over this for a couple of days. On Wednesday, he took Audrey for ice cream after school and she pulled out a folded piece of binder paper that had the dates and places that Pike had been after.

"You have nice handwriting," he said. "I could never do it like this, because I can't read my own."

"Funny thing," she said, "I think it was good for my dad to dredge it all up when I asked him . . . A kind of catharsis."

"Well please thank him," Pike said.

"So now you know all our family secrets." Audrey winked at him. "Some day maybe I'll even know yours."

"Let me ask you something, though," he said. "This is just for my own amusement . . . but if you could go back and change some little thing, like in a comic book or something . . . and the guy wanted to prove to himself it worked, how would you handle it?"

Audrey shook her head and smiled. "I must say, the mystery continues. I don't mind though."

"Meaning I got you off balance?"

“To say the least,” she said. “Getting back to your question, I have no idea what you just asked me.”

“Okay here’s the deal,” he said. “I went to library the other day, roamed around some of the science fiction, dudes going back in time, and what not . . . I get to thinking, I should try to write a story.”

“I see . . . were the characters going forward in time as well then? Into the future?”

Pike hadn’t considered *that*, and it threw him a curveball. It was too overwhelming to conceive of in his case, one more thing piled on.

He said, “Nah, let’s just keep it they can only go back.”

“So you’re a writer now, among other things,” Audrey said. “That’s terrific!”

“You’re jumping the gun big-time. A wannabee writer. At the most . . . In any case, my guy would have to go someplace and do *what*, to prove himself?”

“Well, if you want to be a bit mischievous . . . how about he goes back and changes some bad grades he received? So he gets into a better college.”

“Okay . . . that’d be one idea . . . I was thinking more, not involving himself.”

“Well, maybe move something then? Change a location?”

Pike was turning it over. “That’s not bad,” he said. “I think you’re on the right track.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely . . . Hey, *you* should write one of these things. Forget about me trying to do it.”

“Writing a science fiction story is not on my immediate agenda,” she said. “And something tells me it’s not on yours either . . . Is it?”

“It may not be,” Pike said. “Something to think about, though.”

“Just like your 26-year-old friend? Something to think about there too?”

“Hold on now, that’s a whole different thing,” he said.

Fortunately, Audrey still wasn’t mad. She was jerking his chain, but having fun with it.

“So let’s put this all in perspective,” she said. “This attractive female friend is a time traveler from the future . . . She wants to contact my family in the past for some reason, either here in Beacon or in Chico . . . Mitch is trying to interfere with the whole thing . . . But the man you and Mitch spoke to last time, before you got so hungry again, he can straighten everything out . . . Am I on the right track?”

“You are,” Pike said, “and you’re beautiful.”

He put his arm around her, and they left the ice cream place and he drove her home. Tomorrow was Thanksgiving, but they had school on Friday. They used to have it off, but some genius decided there were too many school holidays as it was. So it wasn't a typical weeknight, but Audrey said she should study.

Audrey's suggestion on moving a location was perfect, but trying to come up with the specifics was killing Pike. Meanwhile Thanksgiving with his family was a dud. Just the family sitting there, going through the motions, not much spark. His mom's turkey and stuffing, honestly, had been better. Not a particularly happy scene. There was at least some decent football on.

On Friday Marty Clarke said a few guys were going snowboarding at Tahoe after school, his uncle had a cabin up there, Clarke said, and did he want to come.

It sounded really good actually, but Pike said, "Appreciate you asking me, man. I'm going to stick around though. Tie up some loose ends."

"Suit yourself," Clarke said. "I don't know about you, but this hick town's getting old in a hurry. Weekends around here are way overrated."

Pike couldn't disagree with him, but he was determined to take care of business, and Saturday in the school closet was the right place. He thought of something. Could he alter their little trip somehow? Like they go up there, they snowboard, but then he makes it that one of them didn't go *after all*? He sidetracks that one guy? That proves that he really can do it?

This was getting stupid. Finally it came to him, simple and clear. *Idiot. Go back there and use your strength to change something physical, plain and simple. Rip something in half, or some shit. Just take care of it.*

By Saturday afternoon Pike had sort of figured it out. On the visitors' side of the Hamilton football field there was a high scaffold, permanently set up, where photographers would go up and film the games. It was a good vantage point. You climbed a ladder and then there were 2 x 6 floor boards and a railing. The whole thing was pretty rickety.

That was beside the point. There was a letter **H** up there that framed the back of the platform.

Just go back a day, climb the sucker, take the damn **H** down, and set it on the grass. Wouldn't that take care of it?

Hopefully it would, and he could move forward with more important stuff.

Saturday started off the same as last week, not many people around, the gym door being open, but unfortunately Julio the custodian was at school. The closet door was open, the light was on, and Julio was powerwashing one of the locker rooms.

“What are you *doing* here?” Pike said. “I thought you didn’t work weekends.”

“What, you keep track of my schedule now?” Julio said. But he was friendly, one of those guys who whistled while he worked.

“Well are you going to be taking a break soon? Or leaving for the day?”

“Damn, Gillette. What’s up with you?”

“Only . . . cause if you weren’t,” Pike was thinking on the fly, “I’d buy you lunch.”

“Well that’s nice of you,” Julio said. “And also strange of you. But I already ate.”

“So an early dinner then . . . or some take-out.”

Julio shut down the power washer and gave Pike his full attention. He said, “Man, I watched you play. I enjoyed it. Didn’t know you were one weird individual.”

“Can I give you ten bucks, to go to Subway or something?” Pike said, hoping he had that much on him. “I got a little workout routine I want to do in the gym, should only take twenty minutes or so.”

“You mean yoga type stuff?” Julio said, laughing. “Where you meditate or whatever it is, and you need quiet?”

“I know you’re kidding, but that’s not far off,” Pike said, and it wasn’t. He pulled out the money.

“Fine, whatever. You want something too, or you don’t eat that crap?”

“I’m good, thank you,” Pike said, though actually he was ravenous and the suggestion made it worse.

Julio went in the closet, got his jacket, and a minute later Pike could hear his car starting up.

The closet felt about the same. There was some stuff moved around and the disinfectant smelled different, slightly minty. Pike closed the door and turned off the light.

This time he’d taken a picture of the football field, specifically the *Wildcats* logo at the fifty-yard line, which was hand-painted by one of the art classes and pretty unique. He sat on the cold cement floor again and turned on his phone and focused on the picture. He visualized yesterday, Friday, kids coming out of class, and specifically Clarke and the guys who were going snowboarding, having a little get-together in the parking lot before they took off for Tahoe.

It was easier knowing what to expect. First the mild, and after a few minutes the deeper relaxation. Then came the spinning, finally the shaking, a little bumpier this time, and then boom.

Pike looked around. He could smell grass, football grass, a good thing. He was on a field, sitting right in the center, and he stood up. There were metal bleachers on the home side, and less extensive wooden ones on the visiting side. Unfortunately, it didn't take long to figure out this wasn't Hamilton High School.

No. The stadium configuration was different, and god dang it, there was no *Wildcats* logo on the fifty yard line. There was zip. Just beat-up grass.

Things felt vaguely familiar and Pike tried like the devil to place where he was.

On the fence behind one of the end zones there was a paper banner, pretty shredded up, you could barely read the left part but right part ended in **i-l-s**.

Pike tried to run through teams and schools he might know and then it hit him: **Blue Devils**. And probably the dumb banner had said **Go Blue Devils** or **We Love You Devils** or whatever.

Which is why now the field was familiar. Pike had been here not this season but his junior year, when he was on the bench and didn't get in the games. This was Bellmeade High School.

The first thing Pike thought of at that point was *am I going to run into that kid Anthony who I knocked out and visited in the hospital?*

He realized he had more important things to worry about.

First of all, what day was it? Not to mention year.

One good sign was he could hear kids yelling, like they might be at P.E. or playing basketball outside at lunch. So it probably wasn't Saturday, which meant he'd at least changed days.

He walked off the field and headed over to the main school area. It wasn't quite what he thought, there was no P.E. or lunch going on, just some guys shooting baskets that had the look of kids hanging around after school.

Pike picked a short kid sitting on the sidelines by himself, who was probably just a freshman, and he said with as much authority as he could, "Okay I'm going to give you a quiz . . . What time is it, and what's the date? Come on, quick."

The kid seemed a little flustered, and immediately told Pike it was 3:12, and December 2nd.

That was promising so far, the 2nd would have been yesterday, a Friday. “2015?” Pike said.

“What are you talking about,” the kid said, “2016.”

“I was just testing you,” Pike said, extremely relieved to have established all that, and he walked past the basketball players and the main building toward what he remembered to be the center of town, as he tried to figure out how he’d get back to Beacon.

Bellmeade was in Uffington, so it wasn’t that bad, about an hour away. He walked a few blocks and got his bearings, and there were a couple of one-way streets that felt more major than all the others, one going east and one west, and Pike figured he’d be needing the one that went east, and there was a little bus shelter where people were waiting for a city bus.

It didn’t take long for Pike to decide to stick out his thumb. He’d only hitchhiked once in his life, he’d always been afraid to try it, and that one time he was with two other guys at a Sharks hockey game and they only needed a ride a couple miles to where their car was parked.

It wasn’t that easy, it turned out. It felt like everyone and his brother was passing him by, and Pike was trying to come up with a plan B. Which was essentially call somebody and feel like an idiot, *not to mention having to explain himself*.

He thought of Clarke, who was dependable in these situations and didn’t ask too many questions, but then of course he had his Tahoe thing. Either way, he was about to give up on the hitching gig when a car pulled up and stopped, an SUV with a bunch of hyper girls and what looked like a dad driving. The dad opened the window and said, “Are you Pike Gillette?”

Pike said he was.

“They made me go around the block and come back,” the dad said, pointing to the back seats with his head. “One of ‘em recognized you . . . You need a lift somewhere?”

“I appreciate your asking,” Pike said. “I’m trying to get to Beacon though.”

“That’s where we’re going. So today’s your lucky day. Or unlucky, if you can’t take the noise.”

He was a friendly guy, and Pike got in the passenger seat, and the man introduced himself as Henry. The fortunate part as it turned out was Bellmeade was playing Hamilton in basketball, and that’s where they were going, to watch the game. The girls looked young, like freshmen and sophomores.

“Little early though, isn’t it?” Pike said.

“JV’s,” Henry said. “They start at 5:30. We have a daughter playing.”

“Well this sure helps me out,” Pike said. “Door to door service.”

“*You* playing any more sports, besides football?”

“No, just that. You knew I played, how?”

“Yeah well the reason Patsy, in back, recognized you is you evidently injured her brother in a game, and stopped by to see him . . . Which is admirable.”

Wow. The hospital room with Anthony and his parents, and Cathy with him too, had been a blur. He wasn’t aware of one of these kids in the SUV being there as well.

“My little brother wasn’t so lucky,” Henry continued. “Poor kid. He’d only played one quarter of football, his whole life . . . which amounted to 12 minutes. The first play, the second quarter, he sticks his head in there, the ballcarrier coming around the edge, except his technique is no good . . . Head down, form a disaster. An accident waiting to happen.”

Henry was composing himself. Pike kept quiet. The girls in back were giggling about something, not listening.

“Bottom line . . . my brother Jeff didn’t get up. Like Anthony or anyone else.”

“Oh my god,” Pike said. “He . . . died?”

“In a way. He’s in a chair. He’s got some movement of his arms. Zippo below the waist. All we can hope for is medical advances, stem cells, that whole drill . . . Hopefully in his lifetime.”

Pike blew out a deep exhale. “How old is he?” he asked Henry.

“38.”

“And where did this happen?” Pike felt himself getting into it, like he had with Audrey in the car. Not wanting to, but not able to reign himself in either.

“Up in the city. Frisco. Galileo High School.”

“Wait,” Pike said, “didn’t O.J. Simpson go there? That scumbag.”

“He did. So did I. We grew up in the Marina.”

“That where he still lives then? Your brother?”

“He’s in Monterey. He’s a tough guy. I’m proud of him. He goes about his business, one way or the other.”

“Is he . . . married, or anything?”

“No, never happened . . . at any rate, sorry if I bent your ear. Remember to count your blessings, every time you walk off that field.”

“I will,” Pike said.

They rode in silence the rest of the way, which was fine, it let Pike focus on the job at hand. It was getting dark, and he was a little concerned about climbing up that scaffold, and

also not being seen by anyone. Especially now that he found out that it was a basketball night, and a rivalry one against Bellmeade, which always brought more people, even for the early JV game.

They parked near the gym, just a couple cars away from where he'd left his own vehicle actually, except of course it wasn't there now, and he shook hands with the dad and the girls giggled once more.

Pike wanted to take care of this as quickly as possible, so he hustled over to the field. There was unfortunately one doofus walking a dog around the track though.

Pike ran up to the guy and told him he had no idea why, but *the supervisor* told him to round up everyone back here and have them go immediately to the front of the school.

The dog-walker looked at Pike like he didn't get it, so Pike grabbed the leash and started running with the dog, and the dog-walker yelled for him to stop, and that yes, he would oblige.

The moment the guy was out of there Pike carefully navigated the scaffold ladder and made it up to the platform. His big mission, the letter **H**, it turned out was metal, pretty thick, and apparently welded onto a steel base that was part of the platform.

Pike hadn't anticipated all this, he assumed it was a flimsy piece of wood, but he rolled up his sleeves and yanked, not hard enough the first time but dipping into some muscle the second time, and the welds gave way and the letter came off.

It was pretty big, too large to carry back down the ladder, so he reached over the edge and dropped it onto the grass. He was careful, but it still made a pretty loud bang when it hit.

He climbed down and pulled out his phone and took a couple pictures of the letter. He was a little mixed up with it all now, how you'd document the before and after, but screw it, he knew for a fact he was here now, and this was Friday, not Saturday, and he wasn't dreaming some bull roar, like Mitch got him wondering if he might have been when he ended up in Logan, Utah.

Now to make the return trip. Julio's closet could still be a possibility, even with the gym crowded, because probably no one would be paying attention to it with the game going on. Might as well check it first, and if not, find some other quiet part of the school.

Just then a flashlight found him. It was the night security guard, he had his uniform shirt on, and with him was that dog-walker. The guard asked Pike what he was doing, exactly.

Pike had no idea what to say, so he answered with the first semi-logical (or not) thing that popped into his head. “Uh, well, I’m taking the **H** down and bringing it home. It needs re-painting.”

The security guard sized up the situation and asked Pike to please wait right here, to not cause any trouble. The guy got on his radio.

Ten minutes later a squad car pulled up. One officer, an older guy who Pike had seen around town here and there. The officer asked Pike for his ID, thanked the security guard and asked Pike to come with him, and Pike followed him and got in the back of the police car.

The cop drove out of the school parking lot, made a left, then a right, and parked on a quiet residential side street and turned off the engine.

He turned around. “I know who y’are,” he said. “The wife and I, we drag ourselves to the games . . . You mind telling me what the hell that was all about?”

Pike was searching for what to say, but luckily the officer answered for him. “I understand the stage, don’t get me wrong,” the cop was saying. “The pranks, the bullshit . . . Ain’t enough to do in this town, we can all agree on that.”

“But? . . .” Pike said.

“But nothing. Y’all got to *create* crap sometimes. I get it . . . Just not on my watch, okay? I got two and half years to retirement, I need this petty aggravation like a hole in the head . . . For that matter, *any* aggravation.”

“Yes sir, I apologize.”

“Now get out of my face,” the officer said, and Pike opened the door and scrambled out of there and didn’t look back.

Unfortunately the custodian’s closet was locked. Pike went upstairs and started hunting around, thinking there might be something similar but there wasn’t, but then he remembered the teachers’ rest room on the third floor, one more flight up, and thank God it was open. The chances of some basketball fan who had to use the bathroom interfering up here were pretty slim.

He hit the lights, picked out a spot in the corner next to the sinks, and five minutes later went into his spin and shake. This time he got it right, ended up on the fifty yard line, right on top of the art emblem, and he went into the gym and there was Julio still working on the power-washing.

“Where you been?” Julio said. “I polished off the Subway, by the way. Didn’t think I was that hungry but it hit the spot.”

“What time you got?” Pike said.

“I got . . . 4:09. You making me check my phone? What’s wrong with yours?”

Pike didn’t trust his phone not to go haywire, with the going back and forth, so he wanted to confirm it . . . But 4:09, that was good . . . The basketball kid at Bellmeade had told him 3:12, but it had taken Pike five, six, minutes of being there before he asked the kid.

Meaning he’d left Hamilton around 3:05, and now gotten back at 4:05. And then a few minutes tacked on to come into the gym and find Julio.

He’d been gone for at least a couple hours, with the walking into town and waiting to hitch a ride and all, and the drive with the dad and screaming girls had taken an hour by itself.

Bottom line, it was pretty clear that he’d exactly lost one hour of *real* time, despite spending longer than that away.

This confirmed one of the **10 Rules of Time Travel** from that special book that librarian had climbed up and gotten him out of the glass case.

The rule was that you lost one hour per day. So Pike assumed if you spent three days, somewhere, you would use up three hours in real time.

“Sorry . . . what was that again?” Pike said to Julio.

“Man, I don’t mean to be critical, but you seeming kind of *out of it*.”

“I know. I’ll a little scattered today . . . and I forgot something, I’ll be right back.”

When he arrived back at mid-field he’d neglected to check on the **H**. He jogged back over there, and his heart raced slightly in anticipation.

The **H** was indeed missing from its position up there on the back of the platform. It wasn’t on the grass where he’d left it, either. He went back in to talk to Julio.

“Oh yeah,” Julio said. “Overnight, some idiots, they pull it down. I got it inside, we’re going to have to figure out how to re-attach the sucker.”

Pike was alarmed for a moment that *somebody else* may have taken it down. Which meant this whole business had headed even more into the Twilight Zone than it already was.

Except that would have been very tough for someone else, with those welds. He said, “They know who the idiots were? Did they see anyone, or catch them?”

“Nah, I’m just guessing,” Julio said. “What else would it be. You kids--I don’t mean *you* specifically--but you get bored. And stupid.”

“Too much time on our hands,” Pike said, relieved that it was still *him* who had done the damage, that Julio hadn’t connected with the night security guy yet.

He wondered how *that* conversation would go, when Julio found out it *was* him, but he tried not to think about it.

“Anyhow . . . thanks,” Pike said.

“See that’s the thing,” Julio said, “you’re thanking *me*, but you bought me the Subway.” He shook his head and went back to his powerwashing, and Pike drove home.

But then again when he got there, both his parents’ cars were in the driveway, and he didn’t feel like walking into the middle of what he was pretty convinced now was a marriage problem, so kept going and figured why not swing by Audrey’s, see if she’s around.

Chapter 5

It looked like she was home, but before Pike got out of the truck he called Mitch. There was no answer and he didn't leave a message.

Audrey was surprised to see him, nervous, like she was caught off guard. She stood in the doorway, and didn't invite him in, which had never happened.

Then Pike realized one of the cars parked on the street, which he hadn't paid attention to was Jack Hannamaker's.

Audrey could tell that he'd put it together. She said, "Pike, it's not what you think."

Pike had a slight headache from his whirlwind experience today, and he wasn't feeling great about getting picked up by that cop, nor was he thrilled by his parents' current state of affairs.

He said, "Whatever floats your boat," and turned around and walked away.

He drove downtown, cruised around a little, looking for some kind of action or someone he knew, but there was essentially nada. Clarke was right, and so was that cop. So was his dad, for that matter.

Then he had an idea: why not go to the game? Catch the end of the JV's, say hello to that guy Henry again, hang around for the varsity thing. He wasn't a big fan of high school basketball, mainly because he didn't like watching other guys he knew do well when he wasn't even playing. But once in a while . . . what could it hurt.

He'd driven halfway to school when he realized he had the wrong night, that the game was *last* night. What an idiot.

His phone buzzed and he figured it was Mitch and he answered without looking. It was Hailey. She sounded upset.

"My sister needs you," she said. "Can you come back and help?"

Pike said, "I'll be right there." This wasn't the time to get dramatic or hold grudges. Something was up. *Get your head out of your rear end and get the heck over there.*

Mr. Milburn was in the living room, standing up, wobbly, and Audrey and Hannamaker and Hailey were apparently trying to reason with him about something, to keep him under control.

“Thank you,” Audrey said to Pike. “It’s my mom and dad’s . . . anniversary today . . . Dad wants to go out.”

Hannamaker nodded slightly toward Pike, solemn, and Pike nodded back.

“He wants to go out, where?” Pike said.

Audrey said, “First of all, he wants to drive. By himself.”

“He says he wants to re-visit some of the good times they had together,” Hailey said.

“Okay . . .,” Pike said, “that’s understandable . . . Mr Milburn? We’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

“Son, can you get me my keys, please?” Mr. Milburn said. “They’re holding onto them.”

“We’re all just trying to keep you safe, sir,” Pike said.

Mr. Milburn sat down and covered his eyes with his hands, and everyone relaxed slightly. He said, “Safe . . . that’s an interesting choice of words . . . Did you know your father was banging my wife?”

“Oh my God, Dad!” Audrey said.

Hailey reacted like she’d been flash-frozen in place. Audrey clearly hadn’t shared that information with her, what she’d discovered in her mom’s diaries. Pike didn’t even want to speculate what Hannamaker might be thinking, or who he might tell.

Mr. Milburn continued, slurring his words badly, “S’one of the items on my list tonight son . . . Have a talk with your pop.”

Audrey shook her head and looked at Pike and Hannamaker. She was innocent, and beautiful, and now so helpless.

Hailey had recovered enough from the shock of the news that she, too, looked a lot like Audrey at this moment.

They didn’t deserve any of this.

Pike was trying to figure out the best way to subdue Mr. Milburn, without alarming anyone and without injuring the poor guy. He remembered one of the conversations with Dani, where she mentioned putting the sleeper-hold on Marcus one of the times when she had to beat it out of the apartment.

Pike didn’t know the move, had never practiced it, but he watched enough UFC on TV that he thought he could ad-lib it.

Mr. Milburn was talking again, going into more unfortunate detail about Pike’s dad’s affair with Mrs. Milburn. Apparently yes it *had* been going on right up to the tragedy. Pike was

sad to hear this. It wouldn't have changed anything, but he'd hoped it at least had been in the past and had run its course. And not been a factor in Mrs. Milburn's life at the end.

But what could you do? Pike casually went around behind the man, and eased his arms around his neck. He knew of course you didn't want to choke the guy to death, you just wanted to get pressure on the artery. As opposed to the throat.

Mr. Milburn squirmed and started to yell out, but Pike found a comfortable position, which he suspected was close enough to the correct one, and began to apply pressure. He looked up at Audrey and the others and told them not to worry, this wouldn't hurt anyone.

It took maybe 45 seconds and Pike felt Mr. Milburn go limp, his body wanting to slump forward, and Pike, with Hannamaker helping now, carefully laid him down on the rug.

"I know you *didn't* . . . but you . . . didn't kill him, did you?" Audrey said. She put her hand over her mouth.

Hannamaker said, "Reverse guillotine choke . . . right?"

"Or some variation," Pike said. "The main thing, he'll wake up in a minute . . . but hopefully be confused."

And as though on cue, Mr. Milburn groaned, scrunched up his face and said, "What happened? What just *happened?*"

"You're fine, Dad," Hailey said.

"What's going on?" Mr. Milburn said. "What time is it?"

"It's dinner-time actually," Pike said, picking up on it. "We were just going to go get some take-out . . . then make some coffee . . . and then, uh, watch TV the rest of the night . . . All of us together."

"Ummh," Mr. Milburn said.

"So what do you want Dad?" Aubrey said. ". . . what are you getting again?" she asked Pike.

"Chinese," Pike said.

"So garlic chicken then?" Hailey said.

"Fine," Mr. Milburn said. "You kids . . .," He shook his head, but hopefully he still wasn't all there.

Pike looked at Hannamaker. He said, "You guys got this? I'll be back in a half hour."

"I'll come with you," Hailey said.

They hurried to the car. "Which place?" Pike said.

“Up to you,” Hailey said. “And I grabbed my dad’s credit card, so you don’t have to worry about anything.”

“Jeez . . . I did forget one small detail. I’m pretty broke at the moment.”

“Believe me, my dad won’t mind. When he’s back in a correct state, he’ll appreciate it, what you’re doing.”

Pike stopped at China Kitchen. It wasn’t real Chinese, like you got up in the Bay Area, but it was tasty and the portions were big. While they waited he said to Hailey, “Hey listen, I’m truly sorry for all that back there . . . the other stuff.”

Hailey took her time, and said, “That’s okay . . . you knew about it, right? You didn’t seem shocked.”

“Your sister told me,” he said.

“My sister’s in love with you,” Hailey said.

“Well I love her too. It’s amazing to think I’ve known her for twelve years, going on thirteen. That’s rare, with people.”

“No,” Hailey said. “I mean she *really* loves you.”

The order was ready and Pike didn’t say anything until they got back in the car. “You sure about that?” he said. “Jack still in the picture, and all.”

“This afternoon when my dad started getting really drunk, and scaring us that he’s going to try to drive somewhere . . . do something . . . Audrey tried to reach you. For a couple of hours. You didn’t get back to her . . . So she called Jack.”

Pike was confused as to when he would have been reachable today, and when he wouldn’t have been . . . It was too much to try to figure out right now.

“I’ll take your word for it,” he said, but he felt a lot better about the Hannamaker thing, hearing it put that way. And what did Hailey mean exactly, she *really* loves you?

Audrey and Jack had put a couple of leaves in the dining room table and they spread out the food and everybody ate a lot. Hailey brought out a big pot of coffee but Mr. Milburn didn’t want any, and once they retired to the living room and got a movie going he fell fast asleep in the recliner.

Audrey told Pike they should take the dog for a walk.

“Jack and your sister okay with him?” Pike said.

“Oh yeah,” Audrey said. “One thing I know about my dad, when he falls asleep in front of the TV, that’s it.”

They were halfway to the corner when Pike's phone rang. It was Mitch. "Yep," Pike said.

Mitch said, "I'm in New Mexico."

"What the heck," Pike said.

"I told you, I need to look up the Hillsdale tax records. We're in Eddy County. Melinda and I. She's having fun, doing her thing. I'm kind of slamming my head against the wall here."

"Eddy? That's a place?"

"Yep. Carlsbad's where we're at. Where they got the courthouse . . . The problem I've having, it's all on index cards before 1991, a lot of them hand-written. They're friendly as heck out here, but I'm not making much progress . . . You ever confirm your blood type?"

"I did actually. It's AB negative."

"That's what I figured. The rarest one."

Pike looked at Audrey who was busy bent down talking to the dog. He said quietly to Mitch, "I re-experimented today. It worked."

"Ho-ly Criminy . . .," Mitch said. "What did you do?"

"I moved a sign. Came back and it was still moved. Got in a little trouble with the cops along the way, but forget that part."

"Okay . . . but again . . . could it have been your subconscious . . . *telling* you you moved it?"

"Mitch, shut the frig up now . . . I took care of it, and this time I *know* what I took care of . . . case closed."

"All right then," Mitch said. He took a minute. When he spoke again his voice was hoarse, like he was choked up or something. "This is earth-changing stuff, son . . . You must know that."

"Let's not get carried away . . . and let me ask you something, why are you bothering with tax records? What are you trying to prove?"

"We'll find out."

Pike put away the phone and Audrey said that was yet another conversation that sounded interesting.

"Yeah, well, same old thing," Pike said.

Audrey said, "I liked the part where you said, you *know* what you took care of."

"You did, huh?"

Audrey took his arm and nodded. “And of course you moved a sign, plus someone’s blood type entered into it, and naturally the police were involved, as were the tax records.”

“You say *the* tax records. You have inside knowledge then?”

“I’m getting there,” she said. “It’s challenging.”

“Glad I could provide some entertainment.”

“You certainly are . . . But . . . about what my dad was upset with?”

“That’s fine. Wasn’t the outcome I was hoping for, but I guess it shouldn’t be a surprise.”

“No,” she said. “What I’m getting to is, it didn’t go down that way.”

“It didn’t?”

“I went back through my mom’s journals, more carefully . . . The first time I was so thrown off, so shocked, that it was all a blur. Yes they had an affair, but it began and ended three or four years ago.”

Pike was digesting this. “But your dad,” he said, “why would he say that?”

Audrey took a deep breath. “I’m sad that I didn’t know my mom. At least not from the inside . . . what made her tick . . . She *was* seeing someone when it happened, maybe two different people. Not your dad though . . . My dad knew all that, it turns out. I just think when you walked in tonight it triggered something.”

“Jeez,” Pike said.

He wondered, if someone really was in love with you . . . and you really were in love with them back . . . could you continue to keep secrets from them?

He decided you could. *But maybe with a little luck, you could change all that.*

Chapter 6

Monday at school things began routinely enough, but then kids started coming up to him and asking what the point of ripping down the letter had been.

Pike ran back through it. Maybe the night security guard reported it, or even more likely, someone going to the basketball game saw Pike getting in the squad car. Either way, one thing led to another, and today he was a dipshit celebrity around school.

In the middle of third period he got hauled into the principal's office. Coach Geddes was there as well. "The thing I don't get," Coach was saying, "is how you *maneuvered* the thing? You just persuaded one steel plate to cut loose from another?"

Mr. Hill the principal said, "I'm actually more concerned with the blatant disregard for, and destruction of school property. As opposed to the logistics of the procedure."

"That too," Coach said. "I'm just saying . . . the whole deal, it's kind of mystifying."

The principal said, "Are you saying this is out of character for the young man?"

"I would have thought so, yeah. Except there's been a few things this year."

"Well, then," the principal said. "My decision is a three-day suspension, effective tomorrow morning."

"That's it?" Coach said. "No cleaning up the school grounds? Jeez, give him some kind of semi-hard labor at least."

"I'm afraid we're not allowed to impose sanctions such as those, in today's litigious climate," the principal said.

"Fine," Coach said. "But he better put the damn letter back up."

"Again," the principal said, "something like that, it's beyond the scope of district policy."

"So *screw* district policy," Coach said. He said to Pike, "You get that letter back up. It's part of our field, our traditional, every time we line up out there. You don't, I'll personally shove the thing up your ass." And he walked out.

"Mr. Geddes appears agitated," Principal Hill said to Pike. "In any case, let this be a lesson. You're a senior, real life awaits just around the corner, I'm afraid . . . Have you been giving specific thought to your future?"

“Not enough,” Pike said. “For now I’m focussing on the past . . . trying to figure out how to improve upon it, I guess.”

“Well that’s commendable as well,” the principal said. “What parts of your past are you finding relevant?”

“Those’d be mostly . . . the parts that didn’t work out.”

“I give you an A for honesty then,” Principal Hill said.

It was weird that after all that, the suspension didn’t begin until tomorrow. But it was what it was. Pike went through the motions the rest of the day.

By lunch the letter business started dying down, and fortunately the questions had been mostly *Gillette, what the hay were you trying to prove? As opposed to how in the world did you do it?*

He wondered for a moment if Audrey, now that it was probably clear what he was referring to when he said *I know what I changed*, might be questioning his mental health just a touch, but he pushed the thought out of his mind.

After 6th period Clarke came up to him in the hall and said, “See? You should have come to Tahoe.”

The guy was logical, and Pike knew in a perfect world that was absolutely what he should have done.

But now he had other business on his plate, and three days to try to take care of it . . . Which might actually mean nine days on the *other* side, or wherever it was . . . so some leisurely snowboarding at Lake Tahoe seemed pretty tame at the moment. Not that it wouldn’t have been a lot less complicated.

If there was one thing Pike was pretty darn sure of, this wasn’t going to be as clean as his previous little experimental forays one day back in time.

That night he shut everything down at 10 and tried to go to sleep, but he had trouble, and when 5am rolled around he slept through his alarm.

The idea was to get to school, and into that closet, by 6:30, before any early-bird administrators had shown up. Roy, the morning custodian, opened the gym at 6, which Pike remembered from experience when Coach had disciplined the team a couple times and made them attend crack-of-dawn punishment practices before school.

But when he woke up for real and it was 8:10, that strategy went out the window.

His parents and brother and sister were all gone when he came down, which was good, he didn't want any distractions this morning, and he raided the fridge, figuring he could use the extra fortification. There was leftover lasagna he microwaved, and there were hot links from Costco which he always liked, so he fried up two of them as well. Finished the whole thing off with a sizable bowl of Cheerios.

Then he drove to school but parked on a residential side street. He didn't like hoodies, but he'd pulled out a dark grey one he'd gotten for Christmas, and tried to limit his face as best he could. He checked the time, and waited a few minutes until he was comfortable that school was into second period, most everyone pinned in a classroom. Then he jogged around the backside of the baseball field, which led you to the track and hopefully that side door to the gym.

When Pike opened the gym door he'd of course forgotten about the darn P.E. classes, one of which was going on right now, kids in their designated gym uniforms having to play badminton this morning. He darted across the back of the gym and hurried down the hall to the closet, hoping no one recognized him, but figuring even if someone had, he'd be disappearing off-campus very soon, so there'd be nothing to report . . . *Wouldn't he?*

There was janitorial equipment spread out in the closet and it felt like Roy may have just been in there, but right now it was free, and Pike scrambled into position, having to move a mop and bucket this time. The hard part, the real uncertain thing now, was going back to the day it happened.

Which was October 1st, a Saturday. 8-and-a-half weeks ago now, exactly 60 days.

On what had started off as an interesting, and somewhat exciting day. Pike had driven to Manhattan Beach in the morning, it was his first time meeting Mitch, and they had lunch and he had come clean to an extent to Mitch on his situation. Which was a relief, having someone to spill it out to, and having Mitch be totally interested, on his side, trying to help him figure out what in God's name was going on.

This had been three weeks after he first noticed his empowerment, in the Friday night home football game against Bellmeade. Before he left Manhattan Beach, there had been that incident in the ocean where Pike had torn into the water to help the lifeguard.

When he got back to Beacon that night, pretty upbeat, that's when his mom and dad were in the living room with the long faces, waiting for more news on the tragedy that was unfolding.

Now as Pike began to slip into his increasingly familiar state of altered consciousness, he re-ran everything about that day through his head. Then he focussed specifically on that morning, as he prepared to leave for Manhattan Beach. Taking a shower, heading outside, opening the car door . . . The day bright and clear . . . His dad busy doing something in the back yard . . . Checking his GPS for the best route . . . Picturing Audrey's mom, at the same time, taking the dog up the block for his first walk of the day . . .

The spin, shake and Boom . . . He was on the sidewalk in front of Audrey's house again, about 10 yards from where he ended up on his return trip from Logan, Utah.

This was good. He was trying for his own driveway, but at least he'd made it to Beacon, since he was worried he could end up on the Manhattan Beach Pier. The crux of the matter now, the only important thing, was the day. *Did he nail it.*

Again, he needed it to be Saturday, October 1st . . . Just as when he came back from Utah, there was a newspaper sticking out of a slot near the mailbox. Not the Milburn's this time, theirs was empty, as though they'd picked up their paper already, but the next door neighbor apparently hadn't and Pike's heart was beating pretty fast as he pulled it out and checked the date.

Thursday, September 29th.

Son of a bitch . . .

It was remotely possible the neighbors with the newspaper were away or for some other reason hadn't picked up that particular paper, and that it could still be Saturday . . . But it didn't feel like a weekend. There were a few too many cars passing by, and not much sign of life in the houses up and down the block.

It unfortunately had that slightly urgent feel of a typical weekday work morning.

Pike was fed up with screwing around when he got into these deals. He stepped out in the middle of the street and waited for the next car, either direction, which was a Ford Ranger pickup with a roughly 35-year-old guy driving.

Pike stood there and the guy was forced to stop, and Pike, without any *excuse me* or other lead-in, demanded from the guy: *What's today's date.*

The driver was polite enough under the circumstances, and confirmed it was indeed the 29th.

Pike thanked him and got out of the way. *Now what?*

It was unthinkable to mess with going home. *Could he actually run into himself there? Or would the current **he**, standing here in front of Audrey's, be the only **he** in Beacon today?*

This was where you got a major headache, trying to unravel this bull.

Pike decided to trust his instinct, which was you don't fool around with yourself in the past. Period.

It felt like you were violating one of the **10 Rules**, specifically the Number 9 one, that said any alterations should be enacted according to the laws of the universe.

He had nothing else to go by, it just seemed wrong, and worse, like you might be jinxing something that could come back to haunt you.

So until proven otherwise, no, you don't go home. So how else do you kill two days, until Saturday? . . . Do you have to *camp out* or something? . . . Staying in a motel might work except there was the issue of the money . . . If he got his rear end to Manhattan Beach he was pretty sure Mitch would take care of him, but how would you get there without stealing your own vehicle--*the same one that someone else named **you** might be needing the next couple days.*

Pike started walking toward downtown. He remembered last time in this same situation, coming back here unexpectedly from Utah State, he walked all the way to school, easily two miles, because he had to retrieve his truck. Downtown was a lot closer, and by the time he got there this time he'd made his decision, to go back and try it all over again. *Try to do a better job getting the day right, rather than having to kill 48 hours who knows how.*

The old library seemed as good a place as any. It clearly predated 1956, in fact it looked about a hundred years older than that. Big slabs of granite and marble and high ceilings, and stuff carved into the water fountains. He thought for a second about looking in on that librarian, who'd been kind to him when he was searching for the time travel books, and who hadn't reacted funny when he said he needed books on how you *did* it, even though she probably thought he was off his rocker.

But forget that. The goal now was to find a spot and get out of here, and he started with the top floor, which was the fourth. No men's rooms up there, and only one closet, but locked. There was an open reading room at one end, a few odds and ends of people studying, and a huge desk off to the side, which didn't seem to be used by a human anymore, but was now displaying a bunch of books. This month's theme seemed to be hydroponics, which Pike surmised from the material was growing plants in stuff other than soil.

In any case, there was a nice deep cavity under the thing, and Pike made sure no one was looking directly at him, and he casually ducked down there and got into position.

A couple minutes later he was on the football field at Hamilton. He was getting better at this, at least the return-trip efforts, and he stood there for a moment giving himself a bit of credit, though he quickly remembered he was suspended from school and wasn't supposed to be here, and he laced up his hoodie tight and hightailed it back to the truck.

He always felt a little headachy after these treks, and he just wasn't up for trying it again right now, but ice cream sounded good and that's where he went, and some real sleep in his own bed sounded *very* good, so that was next.

Chapter 7

Palm Springs, California

November 25, 2016

On Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, when Marty Clarke invited Pike to Tahoe but Pike decided he needed to organize another session to prove his mind wasn't playing tricks on him, Dani Andriessen began the day lounging by the pool in Palm Springs.

The school district in Pocatello was more liberal than the one in Beacon. Not only did they have Friday off, but they had Wednesday off as well, the day before Thanksgiving.

So you were dealing with a five-day holiday, and Dani and her new friend Chuck, with the help of a good deal from Expedia, decided to get away from the Pocatello cold and enjoy some California desert warmth.

For Dani, Chuck followed Bob who had followed Richard. Who had of course followed Marcus, who was *eliminated the real way*. The others didn't work out for various reasons. The problem of course, the thread that tied all of Dani's relationships together, was she was attracted to seemingly nice guys who became abusive.

Chuck hadn't been too bad so far. There'd been the one incident a few weeks back at the Texas Roadhouse on Yellowstone where Dani ran into a guy she knew as an undergraduate. Guy named Lawrence. He was happy to see her and without particularly acknowledging Chuck he came over from the bar area and gave her a hug and then a big, slightly lingering kiss on the lips.

Chuck didn't bring it up during their meal, but on the car ride home he let Dani know he was pretty upset. Dani kept quiet and let him blow off steam, but when they got back to her apartment and she'd opened the fridge Chuck grabbed her by the arm and swung her around and told her that better not happen again. Those were his exact words, no more, no less, and nothing was said the rest of the night by either of them.

In the morning Chuck went out and got coffee and fresh pastries, and they went for a hike and later did a movie, and if you didn't know better they were a happy couple and there'd never been an issue.

And that's how Dani preferred to look at it.

Now, stretched out under blue skies in 84-degree conditions, she started up a casual conversation with the man next to her. Chuck was off doing a run. He ran 6 miles a day, 3 days a week, hit the gym the other 3 and took 1 day off. He was very organized, and hated to break his routine. That's how they met in fact, Dani working the volunteer check-in desk for a 10K charity run, and Chuck showing up and registering to run it.

The guy next to her by the pool had an Australian accent, which Dani always enjoyed hearing, and once they became introduced it was like a switch went on and he talked non-stop. It was all interesting. His various takes on American life, sports and politics. Dani could have sat there all day listening to him, as long as she kept the sunblock liberally applied, except for the slightly ominous fact that Chuck would be returning from his run in about twenty minutes.

When the man came to the end of a story and paused, Dani excused herself and dived in. It would be safer to be fooling around in the pool when Chuck returned.

Except the Australian decided to join her. They were hanging onto the wall under the diving board, the guy on another tangent now, how his daughter lives in Costa Mesa, is a grad student in the States, loves it here and he fears may never return to Melbourne.

Dani had a hand up shielding her eyes from the sun, listening to the guy, when she saw Chuck somewhat gingerly getting in the shallow end.

She swam over to meet him. "You did your full run?" she said. "How was it?"

"Nah," Chuck said. "Had to cut it short. Damn calf, tightening up on me again."

"Gosh, I'm sorry to hear that," Dani said. "Would it help if I worked on it a bit?"

"Suit yourself," Chuck said, not making any move to get out of the pool, which implied if Dani wanted to massage his calf, she'd have to do it underwater.

This wasn't a good sign.

Dani excused herself and went back in her lounge chair and opened up a James Patterson book she'd picked up at the airport. The Australian man was in the pool swimming laps. Dani thought he looked proficient in the water, as though he'd been on a swim team growing up.

Chuck breast-stroked around for a while without putting his face in, and headed back to the room.

A few minutes later the Aussie got out and casually said to Dani that he'd detected a bit of tension there. Dani said there had been, but it was no big deal, her boyfriend was simply frustrated that he'd tweaked something during his workout.

The Aussie said he could well sympathize with that. He also said, should she need any help, to let him know. He gave her a wink and picked up his stuff and left.

Dani was pretty sure the man didn't mean anything suggestive, rather that he sensed potential trouble brewing and like a good gentleman offered his assistance.

She read for a half hour, felt her shoulders starting to burn, and went back to the room.

This time it happened fast, as soon as she'd closed the door, and it wasn't just the grab and spin-around that he'd pulled on her at the fridge back home in the apartment, this time he backhanded her across the mouth.

Dani should have believed it, but she reacted in shock, like she couldn't. She stood there and dabbed her mouth with her towel. It hadn't really hurt of course, but that was beside the point.

Chuck said, "You forget what I tell you, *don't* you girl? . . . So as soon as you get out of Pokey, you coming on to some prick. Right in my face . . . That how it works?"

Dani said that wasn't how it worked, but her voice was small.

Chuck looked at her like she was a primitive life form. After a minute he went in the shower. Dani tried to gather her thoughts, tried to make sense of the pattern that kept repeating itself, as though it was on automatic pilot.

Chuck came out of the shower and Dani went straight in. She hated to be in there right now, his presence all over, but she could at least lock the door.

Her small piece of privacy didn't last long. As she adjusted the temperature and was getting ready to step in, Chuck started rattling the door. Moderately at first, then violently. Over the sound of the water she heard him yelling that they need to talk, that everything would be okay.

She shut off the shower for a moment. Chuck said through the door, more calmly now, "Baby, let me in . . . That guy leering at your body out there, that wasn't his fault, and it wasn't yours neither . . . I can fully understand it . . . Just let me have a look at you in there, is all I'm asking."

Dani said this wasn't the right time and started the water again. A minute later Chuck was screaming, and apparently attempting to bash in the door or crank it off its hinges.

She took a twenty minute shower, keeping her eye through the frosted glass on the door. When the thumping and rattling finally stopped she got out of the shower but stayed in the bathroom with the door locked until she was convinced Chuck had left the room, which she was pretty sure he had after hearing one final profanity-laced scream and then the outside door to the room slamming like a hand grenade going off.

She tentatively poked her head out and he was gone.

Now the thing to do was gather her things just as quickly as possible, and get to the airport and hope there was a simple way home today.

There was another resort maybe a quarter mile down the road, and that seemed like a wiser choice to find an Uber or shuttle or whatever, and Dani slung her big bag over her shoulder and half-walked, half-jogged it down there. She was wearing flip flops and the whole thing felt awkward.

One of the bellmen asked her how her day was going and opened the door for her, and without thinking too hard Dani went inside and gravitated toward the pool area and once again stretched out in a lounge chair. The setup was slightly different, the pool was smaller but there was a dedicated diving pool as well, and someone was doing flips off a high board. There was a putting green beyond the pools, and a group of Spanish-speaking tourists were engaged in a friendly but clearly competitive form of golf.

Dani figured what was the rush, it's nice here, might as well check a few things before running to the airport just yet.

There was one flight still available today from Palm Springs to Salt Lake, but with the Expedia situation and few other factors it was going to cost her a whopping 600 dollars extra to switch from Sunday to today.

By comparison, there was one in the morning where they could work it for no additional charge. Dani didn't try to understand the logistics of it all, but as much as she wanted to be several hundred miles away from Chuck, she couldn't go broke in the process. So she she booked the morning flight.

Now she had to find a cheap place for tonight, where no one might *accidentally* discover her, and she wandered out front and asked that bellman for a recommendation. He said he'd never stayed there, but the Thunderbird, two more resorts down, was pretty modest and he'd heard it was decent. Dani thanked him, spent another hour by the pool, knowing she was overdoing it with the sun but not worrying about it, and made her way down to the Thunderbird.

She got an \$89 room, which she supposed in late November was a deal. They had a little complimentary happy hour thing in the lounge, finger-food appetizers and a guy singing Hawaiian songs with a synthesizer backup. She spoke for a while with a family on vacation from Lincoln, Nebraska, and when they were gone it was almost 8, a good thing because she could go to bed soon and wake up and this nightmare would be over. For now.

There'd be the issue back in Pocatello of changing the locks on the apartment of course, but that was a day or two away. She'd noticed the Thunderbird had two hot tubs, one up front by the pool, meaning also closer the road, and one by itself, tucked back into a courtyard situation in the middle of a section of little cabanas.

A relaxing soak sounded just perfect, and it would hopefully help her sleep, *never a given after being assaulted by a maniac*. Dani got organized and walked back to that secluded tub, and she put a toe in to test it, and it was just right and she eased into it until the water came up to her chin.

There was no one around and she felt safe back here. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the edge and thought back to better times. There was a summer, she was 10 or 11, when she went with her friend Gretchen's family to a cabin they had on Lake Michigan. She and Gretchen had a game they played where they each announced they were never having boyfriends, and they'd break into big laughter.

You could almost fall asleep here if you weren't careful. You had the crisp, night desert air, and if you opened your eyes a crack you had the stars, millions of them coming alive up there as it got fully dark.

The tap on the head was with the fingertips, playful. "Don't let me break up your thoughts," Chuck said. "I was just passing through."

Dani was horrified, stunned, disbelieving, all rolled into one. Her eyes were on Chuck's hands, which dangled at his sides as he squatted on the cement deck in line with her head.

He said, "I'm a pretty good detective, eh?" He was grinning, like a wide-eyed kid without a care in the world.

"I forgot my trunks," he said. "I left them back in *our* place . . . which I fully expect you to be returning to after . . . But for the time being, my shorts'll work fine . . . be a little wet walking back, but you can ring 'em out for me good when we get there."

Chuck took off his shirt and shoes and emptied his pockets and got into the hot tub with Dani.

“Feels *day-um* sweet in here, you know it?” he said. “And something else, I saw that old boy again who you was making the eyes at . . . He spoke funny, kind of polished, like he was from New Zealand or some place . . . I see why you were so into him.”

Dani had her mind set not to speak, but now she was curious and couldn't help it. “You spoke to that man?” she said, very softly.

“I did. He asked where you were, said you were supposed to meet him for a drink, but you hadn't shown up.”

“Liar,” Dani said.

Chuck laughed. “For real? You mean me, or your new friend.”

Dani closed her eyes and prayed Chuck would disappear, but he was here to stay. Even if she outlasted him in the hot tub, what then? He'd sit on the edge, eyeballing her, dipping his feet in and out, nothing but time on his hands, nothing on the agenda. Except maybe beating her to death if he could.

It was his final comment that set her off, which she thought about over and over afterwards, that *you were dealing with a psychopath, why couldn't you just block it out?*

What Chuck said was, “I'm guessing your mama was a sorry sight, letting your daddy have his way with her . . . and producing y'all . . . Wouldn't you agree?”

Dani reached down, found the back of Chuck's shorts, grabbed a hold of the waist band and pulled *down*.

Chuck was amused for a second, thinking she was playing with him, maybe even coming on to him by grabbing him back there, and then his expression changed to confusion and then terror as his head started to go toward the surface.

The hot tub was large, it could seat about 10 people, and in the center, where you put your feet, it was pretty deep compared to most.

Dani reached her handful of Chuck's waistband to the bottom, which almost submerged him but didn't quite do the job. His lips and goatee were still exposed. He started to yell out and that wouldn't be good at all, so Dani quickly pulled him all the way under by the arm, and then simply pinned him to the bottom with her right knee.

He squirmed for a while and tried to claw her, and at one point she thought he might have bitten her, but *whatever*.

It was all over soon enough. She kept him pinned longer than necessary, but a momentary calm had come over her and her first thoughts were not of the consequences, but

of how she was a little disappointed with Chuck's mediocre fighting spirit. After all the tough guy behavior, he had succumbed quite meekly.

Then she woke up to what she was now in the middle of. She hoisted Chuck out of the tub and laid him on the concrete and screamed loudly for someone to help. A couple of the cabana doors opened and Dani began chest compressions on Chuck. Not the full-strength ones like she'd used when she'd broken the heart-attack victim's ribs at the motor vehicle office that time in Pocatello, but mild ones that looked good enough. People were scurrying around now, and someone yelled to her that they'd called 911.

It did occur to Dani, *what would happen if the CPR actually **worked**, and the piece of garbage **came back alive**?*

She was pretty confident though, that he'd spent enough time at the bottom of the hot tub for that not to be a concern, but just for the heck of it, she made sure her hands weren't applying any pressure at all as she continued going through the motions.

The ambulance guys tried shocking Chuck three times and it didn't work, and they rushed him away, as the police were arriving. One officer questioned her first, a young kid basically, and she told him she was relaxed and not paying a lot of attention and then all of a sudden her boyfriend was limp in the water.

The kid took notes and Dani expected an older guy to show up and take over, but this time it was a woman, on the hefty side, wearing a plain-clothes pantsuit with a badge around her neck. She introduced herself as Sharon.

Sharon didn't pretend to be friendly and spoke in clipped bursts, with impressively clean diction. She said, "So you're residing here."

"I am," Dani said. "We had an argument, at the fancier resort. I needed to clear my head."

"And what was the nature of it, the disagreement?" Sharon said.

"Chuck was frustrated that he couldn't complete his workout earlier. He was unpleasant from that point on . . . I guess it works both ways, I'm sure I was no angel either."

"Now why is that?"

"Just that, after a few days of knowing someone more intimately than I had before, I realized we weren't a good match . . . I was mad at myself for going away with him.",

"And no doubt mad at *him* by extension."

"Probably."

"What affected the completion of the workout?"

“Well, he said he felt a little funny, that he was having slight heart palpitations,” Dani said. “I didn’t think anything of it, and he didn’t seem concerned about it, just irritated.”

Sharon seemed satisfied with this, though of course it may have been an act. “My girlfriend runs,” she said, “and she’s had episodes like that . . . could have been hotter conditions than he’s used to, different altitude, too much coffee maybe.”

“Maybe,” Dani said. “But your girlfriend didn’t die, right?”

“Oh no, she’s alive and well,” Sharon said. “Your man may have had a deeper issue though . . . The one thing, you don’t appear particularly upset.” Looking at her very directly now.

“I’m not,” Dani said. “Maybe it’ll hit me later.”

Sharon worked it around. “All right ma’am, that should wrap it, for now . . . When are you returning to Idaho?”

“We were set for Sunday. I moved my flight up to tomorrow, when it was clear things weren’t working out.”

“Do me a favor, if you would,” Sharon said. “Put it back to Sunday, in case we have any further questions for you tomorrow. If you need assistance with the airlines, let us know and we’ll handle that.” She gave a Dani a card, and said goodbye.

Dani went back to the room and changed. The lounge was still open and she felt like something sweet, so she sat at the bar and ordered a Grasshopper. She assumed the police would be interested in the eventual autopsy, and what might or might not show up. It was hard to see them truly suspecting her though, at all of 125 pounds drowning a six-foot-tall, athletic and muscular guy in a cramped hot tub like it was no big deal.

She considered what the policewoman had told her, to change the flight back to what it was and hang around a little longer. She liked it fine here, especially the new hotel, but it didn’t seem worth it to go through all that.

Plus it would be nice to salvage a little bit of the weekend back home, before she had to go to work again on Monday.

Chapter 8

Pike let it go for the day, but went to bed at 9 this time to make sure he'd get to school early enough Wednesday when no one was around.

He took the liberty of stealing a hundred bucks from his dad. Not *permanently* stealing it, more borrowing it in case he screwed up again and got there early and needed a motel. He almost wished now that he'd toughed it out yesterday and stayed there somehow, since at least he'd arrived in the ballpark of what you needed. 48 hours might be as close as he was going to get, and what if he couldn't even come close to that in a repeat performance?

At any rate, his dad had a wooden box in his sock drawer where he kept loose cash, and Pike helped himself to what he needed, figuring his dad had enough on his own mind to probably not notice. Pike also stopped at Rite-Aid and picked up a cheap dog leash, since you never knew how you might need to work it.

This time he got up with the alarm and drove back to school, the same side street, same hoodie, hopefully a slightly better outcome. The one thing he'd improved upon overnight, just possibly, was he remembered something else from that actual day . . . Before he'd gotten on the highway heading to Mitch's, he stopped for gas at the Chevron Station on Roblar Road out by the fair grounds. He'd gassed it up and was checking the oil when this yellow thing goes peeling by.

Pike recognized it right away as a '32 Deuce Coupe. The reason was he'd seen the old movie 'American Graffiti' over the summer, with Cathy actually, and it was all about high school kids cruising around in fixed-up cars back in the early '60's. Naturally there was a showdown scene, an illegal drag race at sunrise on a country road between the '32 Coupe guy and Harrison Ford, who was driving a '55 Chevy.

The point being, the movie got a hook into him and ever since he'd had his eyes open for classic cars. This one roaring past the gas station was a little duller than the one in the movie, not quite as bright yellow, but it was definitely the same model. Pike never saw it around town again, and figured maybe the guy was from out of the area and on his way to a car show or whatever, but either way, that car was something to focus on now in Julio and

Roy's closet, because it was hopefully one more piece that could help mentally pinpoint this shit.

And . . . almost like it *was* scripted from a movie, this time Pike made it right where he wanted to be (or close enough) and, *son of a gun*, he got the day right. He actually ended not in front of Aubrey's house or the center of the football field, but in the little convenience snack bar market at the gas station.

And sure enough, *not to mention miraculously*, when he got his bearings and looked out the window of the convenience store, the Deuce Coupe went roaring by.

Different direction, Pike noticed, the opposite way, heading south toward the Mixson dairy, instead of north toward the park on 20th like it was before.

But everything still had the right *feel* to it, and Pike right away confirmed the time and date inside the store and it was on the money.

He tried to wrap his mind around the car going the other way.

Maybe he was remembering the direction wrong, from that day. More likely, the thing of it was, when you messed with this stuff, there were *tweaks*. It wasn't worth it torturing yourself trying to know *why*.

Something else too: The time part being *on the money* was exactly right in terms of when he stopped at the gas station on the way to Mitch's that day.

Which was around 9:40 in the morning. He'd gotten off the phone with Mitch a little after 9 when he'd made his decision to drive to Manhattan Beach, and was gassing it up a half hour later.

The clock in the convenience store said 9:43 right now.

But . . . when he'd gone to Utah by accident, as well undertaking the letter **H** business and yesterday's screw up--in all three of those, he'd arrived at the same exact time he'd left (though Utah had the one-hour time zone change, but same difference).

The deal now must be, Pike realized, if you hone in on a very specific event that happened at a specific time, such as the Deuce Coupe speeding by, then that's when you get there.

Apparently.

The main thing, he was here, **and it was Saturday October 1st.**

He'd gotten up this morning and driven to school and hurried into the custodian's closet . . . *all that taking place on Wednesday November 30th.*

So . . . however you cut it, he was again back two months, but this time hopefully in business.

Now to get to work . . .

It had to be, what, 4 or 5 miles to the Milburns' house. There was a city bus that ran along Dayton Street every so often and got you to Sansome, which was maybe 2 miles away from Audrey's. Or he could stick out the thumb again and see what happened. Or walk it.

Or he could *run*. Why the heck not? He hadn't had much exercise since football ended. Not to mention, let's face it, he could cover the distance without a whole lot of effort. If anything, he'd have to slow himself down to not attract attention.

That was another thing he'd learned, or at least was pretty sure of. That there was no apparent loss of his newly endowed strength when he traveled back. Pike supposed that was a good thing, in case he needed it to get out of a jam, and you never knew what else might pop up.

He wondered if that would still be the case if he went back to before it all happened, *which he now was convinced, whether he wanted to believe it or not*, meant before the dental visit on the summer trip with his parents in Albuquerque.

On top of that, could he even *go* back that far?

The answers could wait of course, they had nothing to do with today's activities.

Meanwhile, it felt too good to run. Pike was never much of an exerciser, but he had to admit it was nice to think that those positive endorphins, that people were always carrying on about, might be kicking in. Maybe there *was* something to that. Or else it was just the good feeling of moving around, the freedom of it, after all the recent stress.

Then again maybe it was the anticipation of what was on tap today, that had him fired up.

One thing he had to keep reminding himself of, was that he and Audrey weren't going out. Not back on October 1st. She was with Hannamaker, and he was at the tail end with Cathy. Or actually, he was thinking back on it, Cathy'd probably already dumped him by then. It was kind of a blur.

Bottom line, when he stopped by the Milburns' on Sunday, the day after the tragedy, to awkwardly pay his respects, Hannamaker was with Audrey in the living room.

So now, as he turned the corner of Ortega Street, the Milburns' block, and slowed it down from a jog to a walk, it was going to be tricky explaining to whoever answered why you happened to be ringing Audrey's bell.

One thing he was learning though from this travel business was it generally didn't pay to screw around. The less paralysis of analysis the better. If you didn't know *why* you were ringing the bell . . . ring it *anyway* and figure something out . . . *what's the worst that could happen?*

Pike rang the bell, and Mr. Milburn opened the door.

"I apologize," Mr. Milburn said. "I know who your are, but I can't quite place you . . . That sounds strange, right?" He was a happy guy, at least at this point. Pike couldn't help wondering, did he know about Mrs. Milburn's unfaithfulness? Either way, it was pretty weird, considering the state Mr. Milburn was in the last time he saw him.

"That's not strange at all actually," Pike said. "I can't always remember guys I see every day in school." They both laughed, and Pike said, "Gillette? . . . Pike? Way back with Audrey, to Mrs. Chegwidden's, in kindergarten."

"I knew I'd seen you *somewhere*," Mr. Milburn said. He had a good sense of humor. "Audrey's home, shall I get her?"

"Actually sir, would Hailey be around?"

"She's not. She plays tennis on Saturday mornings. She should be back by 1 or so . . . You're most welcome to come inside and wait."

Jeez what a nice guy.

"Thank you, but would you know where she's playing? Which courts?"

"Over at the high school, I believe," Mr. Milburn said. "It's a group of them, they move around a bit, but it's usually there."

Pike was wondering, did his suspension apply on the weekend? And then he remembered it was 3 days total, which would be Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, so he should be okay showing up on school grounds.

Then he realized, *what an idiot*, this was only October, *so don't even think about it.*

Pike said, "Would you . . . by any chance have a bicycle I could borrow?" Might as well ask.

"Oh, absolutely," Mr. Milburn said, not questioning him as to why he needed it. Which Pike admired, the same as the no-nonsense librarian who found him the books.

Mr. Milburn stepped outside and opened the garage door and told Pike to take his pick, and there were three bikes hanging on the far wall and Pike took the one with the fattest tires and thanked him again and pedaled off in the direction of school.

He could have walked it, or continued his morning jog he supposed, but forget all that.

They had a lively setup in progress, considering it was tennis. Someone appeared to be in charge, and every few minutes they blew a whistle and the kids scrambled around to different courts with different partners. The ones that weren't hitting balls at a given moment were doing various exercises, some of them with bands that were attached to the fence.

It kind of reminded you of a well-organized football practice, everyone had a task and nothing lasted long before you switched it up. Hailey wasn't bad, though she struggled with her backhand.

They took a water break and she saw Pike and it was clear she was embarrassed. "Sorry, but what are you *doing* here?" she said.

"What's the problem?" Pike said. "It looks like fun . . . though I can see you're trying to hit mostly forehands."

"*All* forehands if I can help it," Hailey said, smiling. "My backhand sucks."

There was a slightly awkward silence.

"Okay now, here's the deal," Pike said. "I need to talk to you about something. When's this end?"

Hailey tried to hide her curiosity, much less her excitement. *Hot shot senior guys didn't usually have an urgent need to talk to sophomores.*

"At 12:30," she said. "Then we're on the honor system to run laps on the track, but I can skip that part."

"I'll see you then," Pike said.

He had about 45 minutes to kill. He looped around the campus a few times, nice and easy, thinking things through . . . It was crazy to put it in perspective, that right now, in real life, he would have been just hitting traffic, around Wilshire Boulevard where it runs into UCLA, and spending the next hour and a half crawling toward Manhattan Beach, Mitch waiting for him on the pier.

You couldn't over-analyze this stuff though. It would wear you out, and could easily screw you over royally. Pike wasn't sure *how*, but was pretty convinced of that, and didn't want to tempt fate, or those universal laws in the book, or whatever else, and find out. On all these trips so far, he had to stay on himself, hard, to keep it in the *here and now*.

The tennis thing ended and the kids all came out one gate and were heading over to the track to run their laps, and Pike knew a few of them and said hi, including two girls who were football cheerleaders.

It came back to him now, that last night (in the real world) they played Walker Union, and Hamilton won the game but Pike struggled until the fourth quarter. It was his worst game at quarterback. He was concerned briefly that something was going on draining his strength, some mutation or what have you, but concluded it was mental, that he wasn't focused enough on the game because of all the developments that had his head spinning, including the Reggie Riley brother's teeth stuff and Mitch's website with the wacko UFOs entering into the picture.

The worst part of last night, he remembered now, was there'd been a party at Colton's house, and Cathy wasn't there, which was a red flag, and Pike found her later and she broke up with him. What she said was the pressure of his secret (which he was an unbelievable dumb ass to tell her about) was too much for her.

Now he thought he'd detected some funny looks from the two cheerleaders, like they knew Cathy had dumped him last night and were watching him with amusement for signs of how he was handling it.

Actually, Hailey may know about it too, and may be thinking the same thing . . . Or the whole shebang could have been his imagination. Whatever.

Pike said, "You drove, or what?"

"Usually I get a ride, or my dad picks me up," Hailey said.

"So you're 15?"

Hailey seemed slightly hurt by Pike's assumption. She said, "I'm 16 . . . I can't believe you think I'm still 15 . . . I've got my permit, but I'm not rushing into it."

"Good idea, that's wise to take your time then, stay safe," Pike said. Thinking of the irony.

"So?" Hailey said. "What was it, that you need me for?" She wasn't doing as good a job containing her curiosity now.

Pike tried to phrase it the best way. "You *know* me, right? I mean you've known me all these years, at least on the fringes . . . You've never thought of me as, like, off the hook, or something . . . have you?"

"No . . ." Hailey said, tentative, probably starting to wonder that exact thing now though.

"Good . . . Because you need to listen to me carefully . . . There's no other way I can sugar-coat it . . . I'm pretty positive if you and your mom walk the dog tonight, something bad's going to happen."

Letting that one ride.

“Ohhh-kay . . . so we won’t walk the dog,” Hailey said.

“Wait a minute, just like that?”

“A,” she said, “you’re crazy . . . But B, no big deal, we’ll take him to the park, throw the ball for him. He loves that.”

“Which park?”

“I don’t know, what difference does it make?”

“You gonna drive there, or what?”

“That’s one option, yes.”

“If not, then you’re walking the dog to the park . . . which is what we *can’t* have happen . . . and we’re going in circles here.”

“Wow,” Hailey said.

“You’re messing with me,” Pike said. “This is dead serious. I can’t impress it upon you enough.”

“I see . . . so what exactly is that *very bad thing* that you fear happening.”

Pike took a deep breath. “Only that a car would lose control, ride up the sidewalk and kill your mom.”

Hailey squinted her eyes at him. “This is . . . like . . . a vision, or . . . ?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Is that what they call a premonition?”

“How about . . . whether or not you think I’m crazy, which is understandable . . . just don’t walk the **damn dog** so *I* don’t have to worry about it . . . Even if I’m nuts. Can you just give me **that**?”

“That sounds reasonable,” Hailey said.

“Thank you,” Pike said, “more than you might know.”

“Well you’re welcome,” she said.

“But the problem now,” he said, “I’m starving. I’m getting low blood sugar.”

“Okay then, I’ll see you later,” she said.

“Or you can come,” he said.

“You’re just being polite.”

“No. I’ll buy you lunch.” Wondering could he afford it, and then remembering the hundred he lifted from his dad.

“Oh,” Hailey said. “You mean we’ll just walk somewhere?”

“You can call your dad, to drive you and I’ll meet you . . . or . . . I think I can ride you on the back.”

Pike hadn’t ridden anyone around in a lot of years. What you had to do was stand up the whole time and let the person sit on the seat. He was trying to picture the closest place that served big portions of meat, and came up with Garibaldi’s, on the plaza.

“Well how would it work?” Hailey said.

Pike held the bike straight and she sat on the seat. She had the darn tennis racquet, but Pike said he could deal with it and she gave it to him. He straddled the middle bar and started pedaling, and it was working okay, though Hailey was sliding around a little too much.

“You can just kind of hang onto me,” Pike said, so she did, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and leaning her head forward against his back.

Pike thought to himself, *this isn’t the worst thing*. Though of course it was his girlfriend’s kid sister he was referring to. Still . . . today Audrey’s with Jack, that’s a fact . . . and Cathy and I are history as of 12 hours ago . . . so I can take her out to lunch without any consequences, right?

Hailey ate like a bird but Pike wolfed down a meatball parm sub and a side order of linguini al pesto.

“So how’s everything else?” Pike said.

“Oh, pretty good.”

“Just *pretty* good?”

“Only that . . . I think my parents may be having some problems.”

Jeeminy. “What kind of problems?” Pike asked cautiously. Praying that his own dad was not part of the equation.

“I don’t know . . . men call for my mom sometimes, on the landline.”

“And what . . . your instincts kick in . . . and your mind starts running away from you?”

“Sort of . . .”

“That happens with me and my folks too,” Pike said. “I think it’s normal. Look at it this way, they’re all still married, which is saying something.”

“I guess,” Hailey said. “Thank you for putting it in that light.”

Pike had a piece of cheesecake to conclude matters. He tempted Hailey with a bite but she declined.

“Now this business with the dog,” he said. “What do we got now, about 2: 20?”

“Yes? . . . So?”

“No I’m just thinking . . . can we get your mom to do something different maybe . . . take her somewhere?”

“You mean on the back of your bike?” Hailey was laughing.

“Come on, I’m serious here. We need to focus. We can’t leave this shit to chance . . . like have it all set up, that you’re driving to the park to play catch with the dog, but then first your mom takes him up the block to relieve himself.”

“My Goodness. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen anyone this insistent on avoiding a daily activity.”

“You have to take my word for it,” Pike said, but he was started feel some air coming out of the balloon. It was becoming clear that heading Mrs. Milburn off at the pass might not be good enough. Even with Hailey on board. Which he wasn’t convinced she really was.

“What do you have the rest of the day?” he said.

“Are you asking me if I have a boyfriend?” she said.

Pike had to give her credit for not shying away from a topic that they both might be thinking about a little bit. “I wasn’t, but I might as well now,” he said.

“Well I don’t.”

“Ah,” Pike said.

“So until that changes,” she said, “on Saturday nights I tend to babysit.”

“What do you charge ‘em these days?”

“That’s none of your business,” she said, playful.

“More importantly,” he said, “what time are you doing it tonight? And where?”

“7:30. There’re two cute little sisters I taught swimming lessons to last summer. They live a couple blocks down.”

“So . . . you’ll be leaving like, 7:20?”

“Oh my God . . . What the heck, Pike.”

“What’s your dog’s name?”

“Mark.”

“Jeez, never heard of a dog named Mark . . . But forget that, does he bite, or anything?”

“Never. What do you think we are?”

“Well does he, hang out . . . in the backyard, at all?”

“You’re a piece of work,” she said.

Pike had an idea. “Okay, how about this? Let *me* walk him tonight . . . Then you and your mom don’t have to *do* anything. You can relax inside.”

Hailey smiled and shook her head. "I like being with you," she said.

Pike didn't answer that one, he said they should be going.

They'd sat there for a while. It was close to 3. Pike never had pinpointed exactly when it happened, with Mrs. Milburn. It wasn't something you wanted to find out.

He remembered getting home from Manhattan Beach a little after 8:30, and his dad with the long face when he walked in, said the accident had happened about two hours ago.

So . . . say between 6:15 and maybe 7:10 at the outside, since Hailey wouldn't be around much after that, with her babysitting gig.

Screw it, make it 5:30 to be on the safe side.

"You have anything else you need to do?" Pike said to Hailey. "Or should I ride you back."

"Well I like ice cream," she said. Pike thinking so do I, though you sure didn't show any signs of an appetite in Garibaldi's, but why not.

They killed another hour, between the ice cream and then strolling around downtown looking in shop windows. Halfway into it, Hailey took his arm and Pike let her, and again, he supposed it wasn't the worst thing.

"You and your sister, you guys competitive at all with each other?" he said.

"Now why would you bring *her* up?" Hailey said.

"I'm just curious. Are you, like best friends . . . or if you barely run into each other for a week that's fine."

"Somewhere in the middle."

"Jack a pretty good guy?"

"Oh boy . . . you're interested in her, aren't you?"

"Not at the moment. Honestly."

"I don't believe you," she said, again with a winning smile. "But in the meantime, that ride home sounds fun."

There was still time, and what was the rush? So Pike strung it out a little, gave it about a six block detour, and if Hailey noticed, it wasn't a problem. Pike checked the time as they pulled into the Milburns' driveway. It was 4:42.

"So . . ." Hailey said. "See you around?"

"Actually," Pike said, "would you mind sticking Mark in the back yard? I wouldn't mind meeting him."

It was obvious Hailey thought he was acting crazy, but at the same time she had a little gleam in her eye, and she gave him a long look and told him she'd be right back.

It was more of a side yard than a back one. There was a low cyclone fence with some ivy crawling up it and a tasteful wooden gate that looked handmade. Everything was nice and tidy on the property, there weren't many blades of grass out of place.

A couple minutes later Pike heard Hailey in the yard, talking to the dog. He was medium-sized and probably a mutt, and Pike could see he was energetic and friendly.

Pike had been carrying that cheap, skinny leash around all day that he'd picked up at Rite-Aid, jammed in his rear pocket.

It appeared you could open the gate from the outside, from the lawn where he was standing, that there wasn't any special lock on the inside.

Meanwhile, the garage door was open and Pike returned the bicycle and hung it back in its spot. Might as well get that out of the way.

Now back to the yard . . . and the dog.

Pike casually pulled out the leash and unraveled it. Hailey was brushing Mark with some kind of metal dog implement. "You want to pet him?" she said to Pike over the little fence.

"I'd love to," he said.

"Well hello dear," came another voice from the yard now.

"Mom, this is Pike," Hailey said. "You know, the Gillettes?"

This definitely wasn't who Pike wanted to be running into at this moment, but it was hard ignore the irony of Hailey innocently asking her mom (at least he *thought* it was innocent) if she remembered the Gillette family.

"Of *course*," Mrs. Milburn said, "How've you been, Pike?" She came to the fence and reached over and gave him a hug. She was an attractive woman . . . her hair, earrings, lipstick, blouse . . . it all fit together nicely. When she pulled away from Pike the scent of a subtle but classy perfume lingered.

"I've been good, thank you," Pike said. "Time flies, I guess."

"It certainly does," Mrs. Milburn said. "Doesn't seem that long ago, honestly, the you and Audie were up on stage in that school play . . . Was that perhaps 4th grade?"

Pike didn't remember it at all but said yes, it must have been.

"Well can I get you kids something?" she said. "How about some iced tea?"

Hailey had had enough now and was getting embarrassed. “Mom, we’re fine. We had lunch.”

Pike said, “Actually that would be beautiful, if you don’t mind. Watching Hailey play all that tennis got me thirsty.”

Mrs. Milburn was amused by that, and said she’d be right back.

It had to be close to five, if not after. *No more messing around here.*

Pike reached over and tried the gate and it opened easily. He didn’t need to call Mark, the dog came bounding toward him, all excited to meet a stranger.

Pike said hello to him, scratched him sufficiently on the cheeks to let him know everything was going to be okay, and clipped the leash onto his collar.

“Tell your mom don’t worry about anything,” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hailey said.

Pike said, “I’m gonna run him for a while. I’ll drop him back in the yard.” And he and Mark crossed the lawn, turned up the block--toward Elm, the *other* direction from Birch, where it happened, just in case-- and with Hailey watching in slight amazement and her mom coming back out of the house with the iced tea, they disappeared from sight.

Now to occupy two hours, in fact better make it two-and-a-half.

For the rest of her life Mrs. Milburn, and Hailey probably too, wouldn’t categorize Pike as the most stable, not to mention reliable dude around, but at least she’d be alive.

This was his thinking anyhow. Trying to get them *not* to walk Mark wasn’t going to play out right. That was another thing . . . despite Hailey assuring him more than once that it was fine, that she didn’t need to walk the dog and they’d take him to the park, Pike had the sense that what Hailey said . . . *or even wanted to do* . . . might not matter enough . . . That things--events--may be organized a certain way, and that there was a kind of underlying pull in that direction, kind of like when you’re in the ocean and the wave breaks, and then everything recedes and you feel the enormous and undeniable power of the water as it goes back out.

Whether or not his gut feeling was correct, this would take care of it. The clean elimination of *any dog* to walk period. *Wouldn’t it?* . . .

. . . Or was there a chance Mrs. Milburn would *still* walk down to the corner at the exact wrong time, *dogless*, for instance because she needed some privacy to call or text someone?

Jeez-Louise. May-bee . . . If the laws of the universe really did work like that, with things being set a certain way.

Unbelievable, Pike was thinking.

He stopped walking. The dilemma now . . . go back and try to control Mrs. Milburn directly? . . . or control her *indirectly* by dog-knapping Mark?

Pike made his decision and went with it and kept walking. There were too many times in his life (the real one) where he kicked himself for over-thinking something. More than once, after something went wrong, he'd blurted out to whoever was listening, "God dang it. I should have trusted my instincts."

It was kind of like those standard tests they stuck you with at school with the multiple-choice questions. The word was, the first answer that pops into your head is usually your best bet. Not always, but screwing around trying to pick another one is often just as bad if not worse.

So there you had it. Mark seemed to be enjoying himself fine, checking out most every bush and saying a big hello to the occasional other dog being walked in the neighborhood. The thing now was making sure you could sustain the walk for a couple hours. And also hope the Milburns didn't decide to start driving around looking for you.

Pike pulled out his phone. Something he'd never gotten to the bottom of on these *trips*--did the darn thing work like normal, like you'd never gone anywhere--or did it actually adjust to being here, meaning if you called or texted someone would the same person answer on October 1st . . . or November 30th?

How would you test it, without possibly alarming the person on the other end? Not Audrey, that could be bizarre. Dani, forget it . . . Mitch maybe? . . . That seemed harmless enough.

But when he dialed Mitch the call didn't go through. So he tried Audrey, what the heck, and then his mom, and then Marty Clarke.

Same result . . . it didn't work. You apparently couldn't make any calls. *Either way.*

He tried Facebook. That was even more confusing, because that *did* work, you could connect, but the postings seemed to be a strange mishmash of old and new . . . Like there was one that Pike remembered from several weeks ago, someone putting up a bunch photos after one of the games, but Facebook listed the post as being from 2 years ago.

He went to ESPN.com where he liked to pick up sports news. But there you had old and new articles all jumbled together, no rhyme or reason. Videos too . . . And not just stuff that went back to October 1st, but spanning several more months. But presented like the current articles where the stuff just happened.

You had a headline story about the Cubs beating the Indians to win the World Series, which did happen in October, but right with it you also had a story about Steve Young and the 49ers winning the Super Bowl. *Which happened in 1995.*

So bottom line (at least this trip, and probably any others as well) forget the phone. That nonsense was all out of whack.

Except for what time it was, currently. That part seemed accurate for now.

At the moment, it read 5:37.

Pike and Mark walked a few more blocks, heading south, in the direction of the Chevron station from this morning, though they were a long way from it.

Pike vaguely remembered, from that day, there was something going on at Janie Stevenson's house. Kind of an early party, maybe a barbeque type thing. In fact he was thinking it was someone's birthday, maybe Janie's, or it might have been that she was hosting it for someone else.

Whatever. The point was Pike hadn't even thought about it back then, because of course Cathy had dumped him the night before and the last thing he felt like was socializing with the usual crowd. Which is part of why he decided to drive to Mitch's .

But now it might not be the worst thing to make an appearance. It would definitely help pass the time. Probably there was a fenced-in situation where he could leave Mark, otherwise just bring him inside.

He didn't know Janie's exact house, but he knew she lived on Sheffield Circle, because his friend Matt used to live on the same block and mentioned it more than once, because he had a thing for Janie.

Sheffield wasn't too far, it was about a third of a mile if you turned left on Waverly, so that's what Pike did. Mark happily pranced along for the adventure.

The house was easy to spot because it was the only one that had cars overflowing the driveway. There was a yard area, but Pike didn't trust it because people were coming in and out of the gate and not necessarily bothering to close it, so he kept Mark on the leash and went inside.

It was crowded and music was going and there was a big main table with a cake that hadn't been cut into yet. There was no sign of any adult supervision, which was typical with these things. The adults were embarrassed to show their face, and Pike figured they just hoped for the best.

Pike noticed the back of Hannamaker's head in the other room. One thing he didn't expect, though he should have, was running into Audrey here. And there she was, not far from Jack, turning slightly to listen to someone, and then spotting Pike.

She finished with the person, and then looked back over and gave Pike a small wave, which is how it should have logically played out, nothing more between them at this point than casual friendship in school over the years.

Then Audrey noticed Mark. She said something to Jack, which was probably 'excuse me for a moment', and she approached Pike and Mark with big, wide eyes and a confused expression.

Pike led Mark back outside and Audrey followed. "How've you been?" he said. "I haven't caught up with you in a while."

They were on the front lawn and Audrey was petting the dog.

"If I may ask," she said, "how did this come about?"

"Who . . . Mark?"

"Yes . . . I was scared for a moment, when you walked in together . . . That there was some emergency, and you were bringing Markie to me . . . I know that's not rational, and I'm okay now, I think."

"Good. No, nothing's wrong, don't even think about it." Pike wondering if this is where someone really *did* tell her, an hour or two later, that there *was* an emergency.

"To answer your question," she said, "I've been fine, thank you . . . Is Cathy coming, by the way?" So maybe word *hadn't* gotten all over the place yet, Pike thought. Or . . . I have an inflated image of myself. *Why should they care?*

"Nah," he said. "What happened, I sort of ended up playing tennis with Hailey. Then I came over to your house. I volunteered to take Mark for a walk."

"Wait a minute, that's why you were at my *house*? . . . Please don't tell me you're interested in my *sister*."

"Why? What would be the problem?" Despite the seriousness of the main situation, it was fun going along with this.

"Pike, isn't Hailey a little young for you? I mean I know it's none of my business, but still . . . Secondly, aren't you accounted for?"

"You mean Cathy?" he said. "Hot and cold, I guess . . . and what's the big deal with Hailey being a sophomore? She said you both date the same type guys."

“She *said* that? Unbelievable . . . The little *bitch*.” Wow, this was interesting, he’d never heard something like that out of Audrey’s mouth before.

It was tough to conceive, but . . . was it possible people were slightly altered when you went back? Jeez, that would be one *more* thing to have to wrestle with.

But Pike was thinking *let’s don’t jump the gun*. More likely, there was some kind of weird rivalry between the sisters, which would be ridiculous to try to understand, and this had hit a nerve.

“What time would you have?” Pike said, checking her time against his phone to make sure the thing continued to be accurate.

“It is . . . 6:22,” she said. “Do you have to be somewhere?”

Pike was thinking this was when it happened, within the next half hour. Mr. Foxe barrelling down the street and the horrible perfect storm of Audrey’s mom being in the wrong spot. Maybe a couple feet would have made a difference.

“Not yet,” Pike said. “Anyhow . . . you better get back to Jack. He’s liable to get mad at me for talking to you too much.”

“Oh don’t be silly, he’s not like that,” she said. “But okay . . . did you want to leave Mark with me then? Is that the idea? I never got that part straight.”

Not the worst idea. Pike said, “I wasn’t planning it, but sure, that’d be great.” He gave her the leash. “You’re gonna be here for a while though . . . right?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “The birthday part hasn’t even started yet.”

Then a very strange thing happened. Foxe, the kid, shows up at the party. Pike and Audrey are still on the front lawn and here he comes hustling up the brick path from the sidewalk to the house, a small wrapped gift under his arm.

He goes inside, and a minute later is back, on his way out. Audrey asked him what was going on and he said he couldn’t stay, he had something he had to do with his dad unfortunately but that he left a present and said hi to Janie.

In the middle of saying all this Foxe notices Pike and tries to stare him down, and Pike tries to avoid eye contact. There had of course been that altercation in Gina’s backyard when Foxe had a couple beers in him after Pike had replaced him at quarterback.

Audrey says too bad you can’t stay, and Foxe hurries back down to the street . . . **and gets in a car where Pike now recognizes Mr. Foxe in the front passenger seat, and a woman driving.**

As soon as Foxxe jumps in the back and closes the door, the car starts driving fast, way too fast, out of Sheffield Circle.

Pike said to Audrey, "Could you give me your phone for a minute, real quick? Then just go back inside, I'll find you."

"Gosh, you seem concerned about something," she said, but handed over the phone and headed back inside with Mark.

Pike called Hailey. "I saw the number," Hailey said. "Would you mind telling me what you're doing on my sister's phone?"

"Okay this is *extremely* important," Pike said. "Where's your mom? Right at this moment?"

"How should I know," Hailey said. "I told you, I'm babysitting tonight."

"Fuck," Pike said.

"Excuse me? . . ."

Pike thought about it for half a second and then broke into a sprint. He kept it under control until he was down the block out of view of the partygoers and then he amped it up, similar to when he tore across the beach and into the ocean that time with Mitch when he thought someone was drowning.

This was the time of year the days were the shortest, which was a good thing because at least it was dark. Pike made a quick calculation and it was about fifteen blocks total, and by the time he came to Flemming, roughly the half way point, he really had it in gear.

He hoped no one noticed him, or worse, pulled out their phone and *filmed* him or something, but the streets were pretty quiet and either way you couldn't worry about it.

With three blocks to go his feet started getting real hot. He looked down and it was ridiculous but there was a bit of smoke coming up and he thought he smelled burning rubber.

He likely would have been horrified by this, except that Dani had told him the story of how she unknowingly smoked the spin bike in the exercise class in Idaho.

Pike passed the Milburns' house like a blur and got to the corner of Birch and Ortega. Where it had all happened.

There was no one standing there or walking nearby, that he could see. The first thing he did, he couldn't help himself, was look around on the sidewalk and in the low bushes to make sure no one was lying there.

A car came by, fast, swerving slightly and then stabilizing. Pike couldn't tell who was inside, but it wasn't the Foxes' car, at least not the one from Janie's party.

Pike walked back to the Milburns' and he was sweating through his clothes and breathing pretty darn hard when he rang the bell.

Mr. Milburn answered. This time he was wobbly on his feet, reminiscent of the other night in *real* life where they had all that trouble with him.

Pike said, "Sorry to bother you once more, sir . . . but is Mrs. Milburn home?"

"No she's not," he said, the words coming out sloppy. "She plays bridge Saturday nights."

It occurred to Pike she was looking darn good to go out and play cards, and probably poor Mr. Milburn was thinking the same thing.

But at least she was out, and okay. And not about to walk down to the corner anytime soon. And the time frame, even if you estimated it generously and extended it, would have just about expired by now.

Pike said goodnight to Mr. Milburn and went back down to the corner one more time for the heck of it. He gave it fifteen minutes, everything was clear, and he remembered he still had Audrey's phone, and he called Hailey.

"Again?" she said, amused, and, he was pretty sure, interested.

"What's up?" he said.

"Well . . ." she said. "Would you like to stop by?"

"Gee, aren't you dealing with the little girls, and stuff?"

"They're happy, they have a video . . . You could just, you know, say hi?"

It seemed a little awkward but then again he did have her sister's phone, and he supposed this would take care of returning it. "Give me the address," he said.

It wasn't far, just a few blocks down as she'd mentioned earlier, and he got his bearings and realized he passed the place on his sprint from Janie's party to the Milburns'.

Hailey came out on the front porch to greet him, leaving the front door cracked where she could see in and keep an eye on the girls.

Pike gave her the phone and told her he'd had fun.

"I have to say, you look pretty worn out," she said.

"Well . . . it was one of those days, I guess. You don't want to know . . . It's all behind me now though."

"Meaning you'll sleep well tonight?" Hailey said.

Pike was so drained from the Mrs. Milburn save that he hadn't thought too far ahead. Such as where would you go to travel back at this hour. Or whether he might have to use his dad's money after all and stay in a motel.

"My are you *wet*," Hailey said, coming around behind him and rubbing his shoulders.

"I sweat a lot when I'm nervous," Pike said.

"Are you nervous now?" Hailey said, lowering her voice a little.

"I have to say, that feels amazing . . . You have training, or something, in that?"

"Nope. Just strong fingers I guess," she said.

"Honestly?" Pike said. "I could stay here quite a while, right in this position. But I'm not going to."

"Aw," Hailey said.

"I'll see you soon," Pike said, "I'm pretty sure of it."

"*Pretty* sure?" she said.

Pike didn't know if it was the right thing to do, but it *felt* right, so he kissed her goodnight.

He hadn't expected it, but there was a little bit of magic there.

One thing this business was teaching him, and pretty quickly: You never know. *Do you?*

Chapter 9

It was hard getting used to the one-hour thing, that once again, all you lost was an hour a day.

Meaning he'd started off Wednesday morning, first thing, getting up real early to the alarm, and then traveling out of the Hamilton gym before school started. He hadn't checked the exact time, but it was before 7:30.

Now, boom, he's back, and it's 8:26, same morning. *After all that*. A full day, to say the least. But just the one hour drained off in real time.

He got a little lucky leaving Hailey's. The library would be closed Saturday night at this hour, and forget about going all the way back to school, so he was thinking maybe City Hall, if some door was open.

Pike still wasn't convinced about Mitch's theory that he should only travel from structures built before 1956, but it was working so far--to an extent, anyway--so you might as well stick with that plan. What was Mitch's reasoning again? That a UFO was seen in 1956 near the silver mine where Pike got part of a tooth filling from?

Unbelievable. Who would ever buy that? You didn't *have* to believe it, of course, but that didn't mean he wanted to start testing Mitch's theory either.

Just to change it up, he took a slightly different route downtown, on the way to City Hall, which meant he got onto Filbert Street. And there, a block up was his old middle school, Brookhaven. Definitely an old enough building, and Pike had a good feeling about it, those were happy memories there, and he'd rarely if ever been back to the place.

There were one or two lights on, which Pike assumed was how they left it overnight, but he started trying door handles and one opened, and he didn't find a closet but there was an old storeroom he remembered near the wood and metal shop classes, and son of gun that did the trick.

He arrived back without a problem. He was starting to get the idea that it was less effort and focus to come *home*, that it didn't quite require the full and uninterrupted concentration that going *back* took.

He wondered, and even suspected, that it might be automatic. That you could only go *home* when you were back there somewhere, that you probably couldn't use it like a stepping

stone. In other words, go back, spend some time, and then go further back. Pike's sense was that wouldn't cut it, that you probably had to return home each time, before you embarked on a new trip.

Not that he was crazy about embarking on *any* more new trips, but still.

What did come out a little off this time, was instead of ending up back at the high school, on the football field or in the vicinity, he looked around and he was on the starting line of the track at the middle school.

And now, since it was around 8:30 on a typical Wednesday, you had the hustle and bustle of the kids being dropped off and running into class, since as Pike remembered it the bell was 8:35.

It was easier than being at Hamilton in a way because it was less likely someone would recognize him here, plus he didn't have to worry about violating his suspension. The only problem, his vehicle was all the way over near the high school, on the dang side street.

The decision didn't take long. Forget the car for now. He pulled out his phone, it was back to working normally like he expected, and he called an Uber. He had his dad's money, after all.

The thing now, the only thing that mattered all of a sudden, was to take a big old nap.

Pike woke up around seven that night. Definitely more of a hibernation than a simple nap, but he felt a lot better. Plus he was starving.

There was the smell of cooked food downstairs but no one was there at the moment, and he didn't feel like fooling around figuring out what to reheat so he decided might as well go out.

Then he remembered the little issue of not having his truck, so he called Marty Clarke and asked him if he wouldn't mind, and Clarke said he *did* mind but showed up anyway and drove Pike over there.

Pike went back to Garibaldi's, which was kind of weird, but he liked the big portions when he was there with Hailey and thought why not.

Once he finally had some food in his system, he could think straight. What now?

Tomorrow was Thursday, his final suspension day. He could catch up on some homework tonight . . . or maybe he could check out how Audrey was doing.

That scenario he hadn't thought through carefully yet, mainly because he didn't want to.

His reality was that he and Cathy were done, that part would stand. But if Mrs. Milburn was okay now, that could mean he'd never hooked up with Audrey. At least yet . . . Since how they got together was when he comforted her at the party not long after it happened.

Pike actually wasn't too worried about it, because he knew Audrey wasn't that into Jack Hannamaker, and that one way or another he could make his move. *Or maybe already had.* The important thing was to approach her carefully and tactfully and patiently.

He knew all this intellectually . . . but coming out of Garibaldi's . . . what the hay . . . may as well head directly there and say hi.

Audrey herself opened the door this time.

"Oh," she said.

"*Oh?*" Pike repeated. Not liking the feel of this.

"Hailey's not here," Audrey added.

Pike felt for a moment that his brain was an electronic slot machine, the three big wheels with all the fruit on them whirling around and processing everything, and then spitting out the verdict. The first thing, apparently, he might be going out with Hailey, or at least spending time with her.

"Well what about Jack?" Pike said.

"What *about* him? . . . We broke up . . . after my mom . . ."

"Jeez," he said, not immediately absorbing the full impact of what she was saying.

"But you *knew* that," Audrey said, looking at him funny.

"Sorry," Pike said, very scared suddenly, "your mom . . . *what?*"

"I don't know, it was simply too much pressure I suppose. He's not a bad person at all, I just needed some space."

This was not the answer he was after, and Pike needed more than anything to press her about her mom, but he just *couldn't*.

God forbid . . . if something *else* went down. . . don't make her stand here and talk about it.

Maybe what had happened though, her mom moved out. Things were obviously on the edge between Mr. and Mrs. Milburn, so who was anybody kidding?

Or maybe it was simply her mom had said something to her about Hannamaker, like she didn't particularly care for him. This sounded the most logical, and happened every day with high school kids and their nosy parents.

But despite these possibilities, Pike wished he had a better feeling.

He decided to risk a more general question. “So where is everyone tonight?” he said.
“Bowling.”

“Wow . . . *everyone* bowls then?”

“No, just my sister. My dad drives her. I think it’s like a club thing.”

“You mean . . . he just sits there and waits?” Hoping she’d volunteer that Mrs. Milburn was sitting and waiting also.

“Yeah? What else is he supposed to do? . . . Do you want to come in, or something? It’s chilly out here.”

He wanted to, but it seemed a little too over-the-top weird at the moment. Him snooping around for signs of Mrs. Milburn, Hailey coming home from the bowling club or whatever.

“I’ll take a pass on that,” he said. “It doesn’t expire, right?”

“Any time,” Audrey said, but she was hard to read.

Pike got in his truck and drove to 7-11 where the parking lot was all lit up and he could see what he was doing.

He started googling and sadly . . . shockingly . . . mind-bogglingly . . . it didn’t take long.

The article was from the Beacon Register, byline Ike Brewer.

It was dated Thursday October 5th, 2016.

Pedestrian Struck, Killed in West Side Road Rage Incident

A Beacon woman fatally struck last night by an SUV that rode up on the corner sidewalk at Birch and Ortega streets was the victim of road rage between two drivers, police said.

The woman, identified as Rose Milburn, 43, of 812 Ortega, was reportedly walking her dog at approximately 8:19 pm when a 2004 Chevy Suburban lost control and hit her.

The driver was identified as Gerald Foxe, 47, of 97 Appian Road.

Police said Foxe had been engaged in a road rage altercation with another as-yet-unidentified driver who fled the scene.

Foxe was taken into custody and is being held on \$100,000 bail.

The victim’s dog was uninjured.

Mrs. Milburn, a longtime Beacon resident, leaves behind her husband Preston and two children.

The investigation into what precipitated the conflict between the two drivers is ongoing, according to police.

Pike screamed out loud, "You . . . Mother . . . Fucker . . ."

So this was how it worked. *In the end.* After all that.

And the other question now, *did I screw up anything else?*

He sat there for a while, watching the doofuses bopping in and out of 7-11, coming away with a bottle of beer, or a slim jim, or a roll of toilet paper, or some lottery tickets.

He tried Mitch. It was getting late now, probably past his bed time, and there was no answer. Plus Mitch was probably still in New Mexico, an idiotic thing to be doing that had no connection to the torture Pike was putting himself through.

This was a low point.

He'd tried to be a hero . . . but look where that got you.

Pike left 7-11 and drove around aimlessly. He was avoiding going home, he just didn't want to be there, and he couldn't think of where else to go. At moments like this, he figured you could do worse, somehow, than be on the move.

What he was processing now too, was he and Audrey.

He'd assumed they weren't together because Mrs. Milburn *hadn't* died and therefore he never ended up comforting her at that party, which was Marty Clarke's.

But even though the tragedy did still occur, it had been pushed later, to a Wednesday night.

Which meant Audrey, for sure, wouldn't have been ready to attend any parties two days later.

God . . . damn . . . it.

He headed out to the Interstate and without thinking about it got off at the exit where he'd met Reggie Riley at that truckstop.

He was sitting there on a dirt patch, engine idling, flipping through the radio, when he got the urge to call Dani.

He hadn't spoken to her in a while. It felt like the bond they developed that day in Pocatello, their unique connection, was dwindling.

Tonight he felt like reaching out to her.

“Oh hi,” she said, without much enthusiasm. *The second time in the last couple hours someone answered him like that.*

“Everything status quo there?” Pike said, sobering up to the thought that it wasn’t all about *him*, that other people can have problems too.

“Not really,” Dani said. “I’m in some trouble.”

“What do you mean,” Pike said. “*Real* trouble? . . . or just like, relationship trouble.”

“My boyfriend . . . not sure if I mentioned him to you . . . Chuck?”

“I don’t think so,” Pike said. The last guy she mentioned had a different name.

“Well he passed away, actually.”

“Wait. I know about that already . . . don’t I?”

“No that was different,” she said. “Chuck had an episode in a hot tub.”

“Whoa . . . well I’m sorry to hear that . . . Dang.”

“Yes, and the thing is, they think I might have had something to do with it.”

Pike tried to absorb that one.

“Okay hold on now,” he said, “let’s back up here. Rewind it, what you’re telling me . . . Say *what* again?”

The phone rang and it was Mitch’s number.

“I can’t go into it at this moment,” Dani said. “It’s taking its toll. Right now I need to go to sleep.”

“That’s fine actually, because I’ve got to take this other call pretty badly,” Pike said. “I’ll get back to you soon.”

Mitch said hello, and to what does he owe this honor. He was upbeat, as usual, even late at night.

“I’m feeling brain dead right now,” Pike said. “Not to mention defeated . . . Not to mention, *something else* ridiculous may have just been dumped on my plate, before you called.”

Mitch shifted gears now. He was silent a moment.

“So I take it,” he said, “this isn’t the optimum time to fill you in on my developments down here in the southwest.”

“No . . . What I did, I went back twice. The first time I was two days early so I decided to scrap it, came back, got it right the second time.”

“*Right* . . . meaning . . . ?”

“This tragedy two months ago, the drunk driver thing . . . there’s been reverberations all over the place. A lot of people affected.”

“Ah . . . So your idea was to travel there and divert it,” Mitch said.

“Which seemed simple enough. I grabbed the dog at the right time, and then I went back to the corner a couple times and checked, and I *had* it . . . I’m not making sense. But I did, I had it.”

“I’m with you,” Mitch said.

“So I get home today . . . and what I thought I stopped, the motherfucker still happened . . . 4 days later.”

“It happened exactly the same way,” Mitch said. “Or was there a variation?”

“Jesus, man. Are you even *listening* to me? . . . Is there some part of what I just said that’s not resonating?”

“Son, I’m hearing you loud and clear . . . What you did, or tried to do . . . that was absolutely heroic . . . But I believe this is common. The literature and the oral record tends to validate that.”

“What the **frig** are you talking about *now*?”

“Simply that historical reports of time travel illuminate the difficulty in enforcing non-radical changes.”

Pike said, “I can’t even *tell* you how much you’re getting on my nerves. You need to speak English.”

“Fine . . . What you did, it sounds like, you tried to alter something significant--a major life event--by imposing a minor tweak . . . My fear is the universe doesn’t respond well to that.”

Mitch with the universe business now too, just like in the 10 rules from the book.

But Pike was unfortunately getting the idea.

“So you mean . . . me keeping the victim away from the scene of the crime, or whatever you call it--that wasn’t enough.”

“Not nearly, is my suspicion,” Mitch said.

Pike was running it back through his head. Admittedly, he *had* been worried about Mrs. Milburn walking to the corner *anyway*, even after he’d dognapped Mark.

His instinct had told him that was a concern, that there might be a bizarre attraction between the victim and the event . . . *Something you couldn’t just slap a band-aid on.*

Was it as rational as, she *did* walk to the corner anyway? The only difference being 4 days later?

And what about old man Foxe? He suddenly suspended his out-of-control drive by 4 days too, in synch with Mrs. Milburn's adjusted routine?

Pike didn't mention his gut feeling, from back then, to Mitch. What he said was, "There's no logic to any of it."

"In the broadest sense, I agree with you," Mitch said. "However, I would by no means give up on this project."

"*Project* now. Jeez," Pike said.

Mitch said, "And by that I mean: Instigate a more direct, deeper-rooted interruption of events."

Pike said, "Have you been dealing with lawyers? Down there in New Mexico, or wherever you are?"

"Not exactly lawyers, no. But county administrators and all that, yes. It's secondary to your issue at the moment, clearly, but I'm making great strides here . . . Why do you ask if I've been dealing with lawyers?"

"'Cause you're talking just like one. Everything out of your mouth. What's *wrong* with you?"

"Well I apologize," Mitch said.

Pike felt bad. "Nah, that's on me," he said. "This has been beating me up, is all."

"I can certainly imagine. And that's not to mention, your original concern. Which is of course the entire dynamic of your super-strength . . . That must be quite draining as well."

"Gee, thanks for reminding me," Pike said.

"So what I might recommend, if you wish to pursue this--and I'm of course only a layman, but I'm well versed in the anecdotal evidence--is address another point in time."

"You're saying go back further," Pike said. "And derail this shit from the beginning."

"Why yes. Although the actual beginning may not be feasible."

"But put distance on the situation."

"Exactly," Mitch said.

Pike had had enough, but before he hung up he figured let the guy brag for a second, so he asked how his research was going.

"Splendidly," Mitch said. "I believe I've narrowed it down to six residents who might have been living in Hillsdale when the UFO appeared."

“Good then, go get ‘em,” Pike said, and they said goodnight. Again he felt crummy about talking down to Mitch so much, but he hoped the guy understood that he wasn’t in a celebrating mood.

It was late, and Pike was tired despite the monster nap, and it was time to go.

He took it slow driving home.

If he was a hundred percent honest with himself, something he was so far avoiding, this is exactly what he was worried about.

Which is why, back in the car with Audrey coming home from Manhattan Beach, he pressed the heck out of her about her parents and the specifics of their past. And Audrey had obviously thought he was over-the-top, but had given him that piece of binder paper a couple days later, filled in with a lot of the details.

Meaning . . . What it all was adding up to . . . To be able to take your shot, you’d have to go further back . . . Stop them from moving into the house, the neighborhood . . . maybe even into Beacon period.

Which might mean, he and Audrey . . .

It was overwhelming to try to conceive of right now. Tomorrow was another day.

Chapter 10

Thursday morning Pike got up around 10, no humans in the house which was great, and after breakfast he sat down on the living room recliner and started flipping channels on TV.

Everything on looked appealing for some reason, from the home improvement show where the lovey-dovey couple in Texas re-configures houses, to the anything-can-happen pawn shop show, to the one where the guy goes into badly-managed restaurants around the country and saves them. He yells at everyone, but he gets results.

Pike figured that guy's act was mostly fake, but it was fun to watch.

Bottom line, it was refreshing to free up his mind this morning, which had been getting clogged and cluttered and slammed for a while now.

This was Thursday, the last day of his dumb suspension, so you might as well kick back and essentially do nothing.

Except for . . . There was that strange, abrupt ending last night to the conversation with Dani.

What the heck . . . ?

She'd killed the *other* dude for sure, she admitted it . . . what was his name again, Marcus?

That was legit. Everything pointed to the Marcus guy deserving what he got. Waving a gun around in one hand and a liquor bottle in the other, making threats. The extent of the damage, with the wall becoming the dude's final resting place--yeah that would interest the police, for sure, but what could they conclude except she'd delivered one heck of a drop-kick.

But a different individual now? What did she say, he died in a hot tub, or *drowned* in it or something?

Pike couldn't remember if Dani was specific but he did remember the guy's name being Chuck.

Someone's iPad was sitting there on the low coffee table and Pike hated to get out of the recliner but he grabbed the device and made himself comfortable again.

It seemed too easy, but for the heck of it he googled **Chuck hot tub**. Nothing there, all kinds of disjointed stuff. He substituted **Charles**.

Nope. What about adding **Dead. Death. Died. Fatality**.

Still zip . . . Final long shot before shutting the stupid thing off: may as well throw *Andriessen* into the mix.

Charles Hot Tub Fatality Andriessen.

Something popped up.

Son . . . of . . . a . . . bitch.

Pike opened it. It was a posting from the *Daily Desert Chronicle*, which according to the blurb under the title was the *Written voice of Palm Springs, California, and beyond*. Pike wasn't believing this.

Vacationer Dies in Thunderbird Motel Spa, by Chris Blink

November 26th, 2016 - An Idaho man on vacation died yesterday evening after apparently collapsing while using the hot tub spa at the Thunderbird Motel on Sunrise Boulevard.

Charles Kolskie of Pocatello was pronounced dead at the scene at 9:04 pm, authorities said.

The victim's girlfriend, Dani Andriessen, also of Pocatello, reportedly administered CPR until emergency personnel arrived, in a desperate attempt to revive Kolskie.

Andriessen told Palm Springs PD that Kolskie had experienced heart palpitations earlier in the day while jogging, but that he hadn't seemed concerned and was conducting his evening as normal.

The couple was on vacation from southeastern Idaho, where Kolskie was a union steamfitter and Andriessen is a kindergarten teacher who was reportedly on Thanksgiving break.

It was the second area-fatality of 2016 involving a tourist. In February, Michael Woolworth of St. Louis died after coming up short in an attempt to jump into the Harmony Resort main pool from a 3rd-floor balcony.

Pike read the report a second time. It sure seemed credible enough. The dude has a heart thing, and then he gets too heated up in the tub when he should have been seeing a doctor. Maybe he was on something as well, something speed-like and illegal that makes everything race. Pike wouldn't doubt it, given what he knew of the type of guy Dani selected.

But then . . . what was all that about her being in some trouble?

Right now she'd be at school, busy--unless God forbid she was under house-arrest or something--but that was ridiculous of course. He'd catch up with her soon enough.

The other thing today . . . Hailey.

There were a bunch of texts from her last night, and three more this morning and he hadn't returned any of them.

Something had obviously gelled from two months ago in fake time. It would be good to know the degree of what might be going on. You couldn't just pick someone, say Clarke or Gina or Colton or one of Hailey's friends from her tennis group and ask them: *Am I going out with Hailey?*

If he started texting her back without committing to much, he'd probably figure out the answer, but that's the last thing he wanted to add to his load right now.

Another thing . . . had Mr. Milburn still gone crazy those couple of times and gone after Mr. Foxe? They'd had that confrontation in Safeway, and somewhere else too that Pike couldn't remember . . . Oh yeah, it was at the Foxes' house--Mr. Milburn rang the bell and then cracked Mr. Foxe over the head with a baseball bat.

Had that stuff still happened? If not, and Mr. Milburn hadn't *himself* gotten arrested--along with added the stress on Audrey of all the legal fallout--then maybe Pike had done *one* thing good by going back there.

He pulled up that iPad again . . . But no . . . there were the two incidents still being talked about, slight variations of the way they went down the first time, but the same deal. Mr. Milburn was still in hot water, and Foxe still had a slick lawyer who was putting the little Beacon police department through the ringer, challenging the charges. Which this time involved criminal reckless driving instead of DUI, but there was really no difference.

And then there was one more situation. Pike himself messing with Mr. Foxe at the skating place . . . He didn't even want to know if that had happened again, and he left it alone.

It occurred to him: was *Mitch* any different?

Pike didn't think so, despite Mitch talking in some legal mumbo-jumbo last night.

Taking it a step further, is it possible the Dani incident with Chuck happened any differently the second time around, as a result of him making the trip back to October 1st? Jeez, for the matter, did any of the *football game* results come out different?

Pike looked those up, and everything was exactly the same, and they got beat by the same score the same day at the same big stadium in Fresno to end the season.

Pike had nothing to go on, only his instinct again, but none of the stuff with Mitch or Dani seemed likely that it got changed either. His sense of the whole thing was you had to be pretty connected to the deal he was tweaking to be affected by it, and that for everyone else it was business as usual.

At least that's how he was comfortable looking at it, it was something semi-logical that he could hold on to, and for now that was that.

It was lunchtime, and he needed to get his ass moving out of the house and find something to eat, and today he settled on the taqueria, one of his good-old standbys, and then he decided for whatever reason to go back to the library.

The nice librarian was there again, same desk in back, conscientiously doing her job. Pike said hi.

"Well hello again, young man," she said. She was reserved the way librarians are supposed to be, but Pike was pretty sure there was a bright light underneath it all. The woman probably wasn't all that old. She had a little gray hair creeping in but when you looked at the full picture Pike would put her maybe mid-30s.

"I appreciate you remembering me," he said, "and setting me up last time, and everything."

"Yes . . . now how did that work out?" the librarian said.

"Excuse me?"

"You educating yourself on the subject of traversing time," she said.

"Oh fine," he said. "Do you . . . *believe* in that stuff? I mean not as a librarian, but personally."

She hesitated for a moment. "All I can tell you, is I'd *like* to believe in it."

"Have you ever heard any stories? People that claim they did it?"

"Well, my ex-husband had a friend, Julian," she said, lowering her voice, maybe because it was the library and they weren't supposed to be talking, but maybe because of the

subject matter. “Julian would tell tales of going places as an adolescent, by way of an apparent portal of sorts under his family’s summer cottage in New Hampshire.”

“Were they . . . credible?” Pike said.

“Quite so. Mesmerizing, in fact. One could listen to him for hours . . . Now certainly it’s possible he had an extraordinary mind and thereby manufactured it all . . . But I must say, the detail was quite exquisite.”

“Where did he go?”

“Mostly the 1920’s, curiously enough. A few times, as I recall, he pre-dated that.”

“He always . . . made it back okay, and stuff?”

“As far as I know, yes he did,” she said.

“Jumping around for second,” Pike said, “you’re already divorced?”

“My, that’s quite a direct question,” the librarian said, but Pike could see she was okay with it. It was true, he *had* gotten more direct with people, less beating around the bush. He wasn’t sure if it had to do with his situation or not.

“But yes I am,” she said. “He was largely a wonderful man, but there were issues.”

“That’s what I’m learning,” Pike said, “there always are.”

She laughed and asked him if she could help with anything further today, or had he just stopped by her desk to say hello.

“Well if possible,” Pike said, “could you direct me to something on 1990’s Chico?”

“Are you referring to Chico, California?” the librarian said. “In Butte County?”

“Yeah . . . please. I’m thinking early to mid ‘90’s actually.” Stupidly not having brought the piece of binder paper from Audrey with him, but pretty sure he had the time frame.

“Well of course,” she said, “we’ll see what we can come up with. Is there a particular focal point? Demographics, industry, geography, urban planning . . . something else?”

“What I’m trying to do,” Pike said, comfortable enough with this woman to not worry about blurting stuff out, and what she might think, “is find a family from back then, a husband and wife . . . My girlfriend’s parents actually, but she wasn’t born yet, neither was her sister.”

“I think I understand.” Though Pike could tell she was hoping for more.

“Actually she’s not my girlfriend, currently, I don’t think . . . I kind of screwed that up with the time travel element.”

The librarian didn’t miss a beat and said, “Nonetheless, your aim is to uncover information about this family when they resided in Chico during the given years. Do I have that correct?”

“If you can, that’d be great,” Pike said. The librarian tapped around on the computer and then once again led him to a room off the main library, different than the reference room last time, more modern and full of cubicles. This time, instead of climbing up a ladder to get him the leather book out of a special case, she lay down in a back aisle and began thumbing through what looked like thousands of old phone books that were filed at ground-level.

“You probably aren’t familiar with one of these,” she said, her voice slightly muffled. “Are you?”

“I know what they *are*,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve ever opened one though.”

“These are somewhat out of order,” she said, struggling a bit.

“That’s okay,” Pike said. “Forget it then. You’re doing all this physical work for me. Accommodating my weird requests.”

“All in a day’s duties,” she said, lifting her head and standing back up. “And it’s my pleasure. I was in the C’s hoping for Chico. It’s a smaller town, but we’re normally pretty thorough within California. No directory for it that far back though, I’m afraid.”

“But you’re saying, if I *can* find an old phone book, like in Chico itself, that’d be one way.”

“We’re not done yet here,” she said. “Now we look online. One of the few things the internet has been deficient in keeping up with is the telephone white pages. It’s not as easy as it should be to find 25-year-old phone numbers and addresses.”

They went back to her desk. “All right now, the names?”

Pike realized, shockingly, he couldn’t remember Audrey’s parents’ first names. “Jeez, my bad,” he said, “all I have right now is Milburn.” And he spelled it.

“Nada,” the librarian said before long. “See this is the problem, we’re shut out. There’s apparently a paid service, for what it’s worth.”

“I can pay, that’s fine,” Pike said.

“No. Come with me,” she said. This time they went into an office.

“This is the head librarian’s office,” she said. “But he’s a bum, frankly. They transferred him here from San Diego but he’s never around. Make yourself comfortable.”

Pike did as he was told, there was a comfy couch, and she fired up the head librarian’s computer and a couple minutes later was writing something down.

“We have a special program reserved for departmental administrative searches,” she said, handing him the slip of paper. “It allows us to bypass a great deal of consumer databank issues.”

“Oh,” Pike said. “So this was departmental?”

“It positively was *not*,” she said. She let it hang, a little mischief in the woman under the surface.

Pike looked at the paper. There was an address, *2730 Buttercup Lane, Chico. Rose and Preston Milburn*. She included the year from the directory apparently, *1993*.

He studied the information a moment. “I think my dad’s been fooling around on my mom,” he said.

Again, without seeming to be thrown off stride, the librarian said, “I’m sorry to hear that. These things happen.”

“And my deal,” Pike said, “If I can go back to when I need, and intercept people, or sidetrack them, or whatever else--I’m not sure--”

For one of the few times since he’d discovered his empowerment he felt himself breaking down, that it all may simply be too big a weight.

“It’s okay,” the librarian said softly.

“Anyhow,” Pike said, recovering a bit, “I’m sorry to lay it on *you*, who barely knows me. There’s no excuse for that.”

“How would you proceed in terms of the Chico family?” she said.

“Wow . . . do you really want to hear?”

“I certainly do.”

“Well . . . If I can *go* there--the first thing is nail that part, which can definitely be tricky--then I find the people, the Milburns, and . . . I screw ‘em up somehow. I’m not quite sure *how*.”

“And . . . screw them up, what does that mean?”

“It means I stop them from moving their rear ends back to Beacon and having kids here and settling down and raising them for twenty years.” Pike was tensing up a little bit, starting to visualize a few things.

“And this is required, because? . . . Wait a moment, was that the woman who perished recently?”

“Okay, yeah. I should have thought of that, that you’d recognize the name.”

“My gosh what a tragedy.”

“It was. The daughters, particularly one of them, is all messed up now, the dad is too, plus he acted out and could end up in some serious trouble, if you can believe it . . . Even the

kid of the asshole who did it, he's on big-time drugs and maybe breaking into houses, from what I heard."

"So, if I'm following you correctly," she said, "your intent is to alter history." Saying it perfectly steady, like it was no big deal.

"I tried to once already. I'm learning I have to cut it off deeper. To have any shot at all . . . Even then I have no idea if it's workable."

The librarian looked at him for a minute and didn't say anything. He was pretty sure she thought he was wacko, even though she was being polite.

But then she said, "I must tell you, your scenario bears resemblance to some that our friend Julian related. The need to pursue depth to effect significant change."

If Pike didn't know better, he'd say that *she* was nuts.

But he supposed it was encouraging to get some feedback that he could relate to, even if her friend Julian *was* making it all up. Or maybe *she* was, who knows. But still . . .

"So," he said, "I'll get out of your hair."

The librarian said, "If I may inject a final question. And please stop me if I'm butting in."

"Are you kidding?" Pike said. "I love having people butt in."

"The projected Chico episode, will that involve your parents as well?"

Pike could see where she was going, he'd blurted out the stuff about his dad and then left it hanging.

"My dad was making it with Mrs. Milburn," he said.

"I suspected that was a possibility," she said.

"So is it all related? I guess, though who knows what the story is with my dad.

Something he said not too long ago, which I should have paid attention to, that there's not a whole lot to do in this hick town. "

"And your fear, is it that should you succeed in re-routing the Milburns away from Beacon, your dad may still wander."

"That's one of the many," Pike said.

Chapter 11

Wait a second. Hold on here. Pike was halfway down the stairs coming out the front of the library. But what was he *thinking*?

There's no way Audrey rode back with him from Manhattan Beach any more, and then presented him with the binder paper information obviously, because he'd botched the whole thing up, and they never were an item.

Did that piece of paper even exist now? He'd stuck it in his desk drawer at home, and hadn't opened the drawer in a while, and definitely not since he got home from his travels yesterday.

Heck, did that possibly mean I drove Hailey down there and she gave me all the same information?

He was extremely curious to find out what the story was, and whose handwriting was on the paper. If there was one.

But regardless of the confusion . . . the important thing to zero in on was that he had Mr. and Mrs. Milburn's address from before they moved back to Beacon. If he remembered his conversation with Aubrey in the car (from previous reality when they *did* drive home from Mitch's together) her parents would have been in their early 20's when they lived in Chico.

Just a few years out of graduating from Hamilton, actually . . . So not much older than *he* was, which added another layer of weirdness to the set-up.

Pike got home around 3:30. His mom and brother and sister were in the kitchen decorating some kind of cake and they asked him if he wanted to help, which they knew would never happen, and Pike went upstairs and closed his door.

This was a good time to call Dani, it would be 4:30 out there Idaho, and he had some privacy.

But first . . . He opened that desk drawer, and there it was, though this time not a sheet of binder paper but an unlined piece of copy paper, folded in half. There were bits and pieces of information filled in, not nearly as much as Audrey's had contained, and there were several question marks scattered throughout.

Pike had no idea what Hailey's handwriting looked like, but it was hard not to suspect this was it.

Leaving that thought and the ramifications alone for the time being . . . he called Dani.

"Hey again," she said. "I kind of wish you were out here, frankly."

"Now why's that?" Pike said.

"I don't know, just a shoulder to vent on . . . so to speak . . . who might be the one person who completely understands me."

"I miss you in that way too," he said, "I won't deny it . . . But how can you say I completely understand you, **when another dude bites the dust.**"

"Do you have to put it that way?"

"I looked it up, the basics . . . This guy Chuck, he had a heart attack, or drowned, or what?"

"I think so."

"You *think* so? It said you tried to CPR him."

"That's true . . . Between you and me, I hoped it wouldn't work."

"Unreal," Pike said, though he had to admit--and he couldn't relate it to a specific situation of his own--but he could maybe understand her attitude.

If the guy was positively evil, or something.

Okay well perhaps he *could* relate to it. Mr. Foxe, for example . . . if he were in need of medical attention after he'd just mowed down Mrs. Milburn and Pike happened to be on hand? Yeah, Pike would give it to him but he'd also hope it didn't work. *So there you go.*

Pike assumed that was human nature, and if it wasn't--too bad. That's how he saw it.

Anyhow . . . "So either way," he said, "you're okay with the police and stuff? . . . Or you're not."

"I feel I'm not . One significant mistake I made, in retrospect, was leaving Palm Springs early."

"Even though they told you to stick around," Pike said.

"Yes. How'd you know?"

"A wild guess . . . It never looks good, at least on TV in those situations, when the perp kind of slaps the authorities in the face."

"Perp . . . gosh, you're pretty funny. And way off."

"What happens then, they take it personal. Then they work way harder on it, because they don't want you to get away with it."

"I see. Not get away with the embarrassing-them part."

"Yeah, forget about whether someone actually killed the guy or not. They don't like you treating them rude."

Dani laughed, though she reined it in pretty quick. She said, "You seem quite worked up today, I must say. Is everything normal on your end?"

"You're right, and you read me pretty well . . . No, if you want to know the truth. There are about 25 things wrong, and those are just the bigger ones."

"Ooh. Anything I can do, at all?"

"Thanks for asking, but you've got your own mess. I can tell . . . So the bottom line is what?"

Pike could hear Dani shuffling around, like she didn't really want to get into it. She said, "Are you still 18? 'Cause you seem somewhat wiser about the ways of the world than when I met you in person . . . How long ago was that, anyway?"

Pike was jarred for just a second by the thought: On top of everything else that's going on . . . Could I somehow be *older*?

Fuck.

He dismissed it. There was no way that'd be logical . . . Even though you could say that about most of the rest of it . . . But no.

Maybe the whole experience these last few months *had* matured him a little bit. Or maybe it was just his current bad mood putting a no-nonsense spin on things, so he *sounded* smarter.

If he couldn't at least hold on to the simple fact of being 18, he was in major trouble.

"That would have been October 22nd or 23rd," Pike said. "The reason I remember, that was the weekend I flew, so it was a big deal . . . So today's what . . . wow, we got December 1st. So what's that make it, six weeks?"

"Speaking of that," she said, "football, have you confirmed any plans for next year?"

"Nah. I haven't been pushing it. The better schools, I'm pretty sure I'm not on their radar. Or if I'm *on* it, low down . . . The worse ones, the D-2 schools no one's ever heard of, one or two of those may want me. Not sure I want to do anything about it though."

"Well don't feel obligated, you need to be true to your heart," she said. "That tennis player, Djokovic, he doesn't like the game apparently."

"Wait a second," Pike said, "he became number one in the world. So *what* if he doesn't like it?"

“Okay, I don’t know what I’m trying to say.”

“Nah, I get you . . . but you keep changing the subject on me. You’re in some trouble, *how?*”

He could picture her taking a couple of deep breaths. “Well, it could be entirely harmless, but the two detectives who were involved when Marcus passed away, they’ve been talking to me again.”

Pike was processing it. “You mean they got back involved because of the California thing? The Palm Springs cops hooked up with them?”

“I’m not sure. It may have been as simple as the Chuck thing being on the news out here, since he’s local . . . Their issue now, these detectives, is that it’s quite a coincidence. That’s how one of them put it, and the other one added the word ‘indeed’.”

“Ooh boy,” Pike said. “You have a lawyer, in case?”

“I do. But what I’m worried about is the autopsy coming back . . . In case he might have struggled or something while he was drowning . . . Do you think that would show up?”

“All right,” Pike said, feeling suddenly like he was in damage mode. “Don’t ask that kind of question to anyone else. Don’t google it. Nothing.”

“I haven’t. And I won’t,” Dani said. “The other part that’s not great, that the detectives here seem interested in, is we had an argument, Chuck and I, and I slipped away and got another hotel. He stalked me and found me that night.”

“Oh . . . The news article didn’t mention that part . . . So the cops are curious about the similarities. Bad guys bothering you, and both coming up empty.”

“So to speak, yes.”

Pike heard a car door close outside, his dad getting home from work.

“Well now you’ve ruined my day worse,” he said to Dani.

“Oh I forgot,” she said. “One more thing, on maybe a brighter note . . .”

“Yep?”

“Well it’s bittersweet, actually . . . Do you ever roam around online, hoping to find any clues to our . . . condition?”

“No. I did the first couple days. That was enough. You get people weighing in with all kinds of unrelated stuff. You think it could be you for a split second, and then you realize they’re off the deep end.”

“Well I have. On and off. In a roundabout way I ended up in a forum . . . Women whose husbands--or boyfriends, partners--have unusual physical characteristics that they hide.”

“Oh no.”

“Typically, they are--”

“Don’t even tell me,” Pike said. “First of all, it sounds like one of those adult kink chat rooms.”

“That’s not it at all,” Dani said.

“And what are *you* doing in there? Don’t *you* have the physical thing you’re hiding, not any *boyfriend*?”

“Very true. As I said, it was a circuitous route to find my way there. But I met someone. Don’t you want to hear about it?”

“No,” Pike said.

“Okay then . . . Before we get off though, tell me anything else new in your life. Did you have a nice Thanksgiving, and all?”

“Go ahead,” he said. “Sorry for being so grouchy.”

“Well very quickly . . . I met a woman named Erline. She’s from New York. Her husband was a police officer, speaking of which. Sadly he was struck down during some sort of shootout last summer. It was on the 4th of July, which shouldn’t have anything to do with it, but makes me even a little sadder.”

“Me too,” Pike said.

“At any rate, Erline is convinced he had a condition similar to ours, that he tried not to share with her.”

“Convinced *how*?”

“I believe the first time it became apparent was when they were Christmas shopping in the middle of New York City and a runaway taxi cab came barrelling toward them in the middle of a crosswalk.”

Pike couldn’t help anticipating what might be coming next. And for whatever reason, *vehicles* were sure figuring into a lot of this stuff. Him lifting the front end at CVS to screw up the thief, the tossing of the road construction guy, the re-directing of the arguing driver in Santa Monica, the business where he ripped the steering wheel off the car outside the party, thinking it was Foxe’s though it wasn’t.

“How far back did that happen, the taxi thing?” he said.

“I believe it was the most recent Christmas, so I guess 2015? . . . He scooped her up and then more or less broad-jumped them both from around the center of the crosswalk to the curb.”

Wow. "What else?" Pike said.

"She said there were little indications here and there, but that he vehemently denied his ability whenever she'd attempt to bring it up . . . But then after he passed, his partner, on the force, he took Erline aside and told her about, you know, other superhuman things Don had done. That was his name . . . The partner said he didn't want to freak her out, but he felt she should know."

So, okay, maybe another one surfaces. *What could you do?* And did it really matter?

So far now you had someone in Florida, someone in Utah, the Texas dude who had the filling taken out, which then disappeared . . . Who else? . . . You had Reggie Riley's brother, the soldier, who Pike couldn't remember the first name of, was it Billy? And of course there was himself and Dani, and now quite possibly this Don.

Pike said, "Did you ask her if he had any recent dental work?" He realized he was sounding like Mitch now.

"Not yet," Dani said.

"Anyone else seem to connect with her in that forum? . . . Or just you?"

"My sense is mostly me. Why?"

"Because they're all going to think she's mentally ill. We don't, necessarily, because we can relate."

"Well anyhow . . . I thought you'd be interested in that."

"Yeah, but you said it was on the brighter side. What does *that* mean?"

"Only that I feel like I'm helping her . . . plus it helps me too, knowing they're more of us out there."

Pike didn't like visualizing this. "You told her about your condition too? . . . And about people like me?"

"No, no. Please . . . I'm not stupid. I've simply told her I'm interested in the subject, and open-minded to it. She's fine with that."

Pike thought of something else. "They have any kids there, this Don and Erline?"

"They did not. Which I'm sensing she regrets . . . The one bright spot in that regard, they donated his organs."

Pike didn't respond to that one.

Dani said, "Are you okay? Are you following me?"

"Yeah, I heard you," he said.

“Well at least *I* thought that was a bit of good news,” she said. “The main thing, this way she feels he’s still around. She thinks of the donations as a shining light.”

“Unh-huh. Could be,” Pike said.

“You seem preoccupied. I must be rambling on my end.”

“No that’s fine . . . talk to you soon?”

She said that sounded good, and they hung up.

One more thing new now, which Pike needed to know about like a hole in the head. Even though it was back in New York, or wherever--what might happen to the next guy, after receiving the first guy’s organs and blood and whatever else?

It was definitely something to run by Mitch.

On a related subject, he was trying to remember, did he ever tell Dani about Mitch tracking down the silver from that mine, that went into Pike’s and the Texas guy’s--and maybe Dani’s-- filling?

Of course, how would it help anything, really, to know that might be the case? Dani had more serious concerns now, it sure sounded like.

Chapter 12

It actually didn't feel too bad to be back at school Friday, after he spent the three days serving out his suspension for pulling the letter **H** off of the elevated platform of the football field.

There was a routine, a normal element to it, that in all honesty he'd never appreciated before, but sort of was now.

Pike wouldn't go so far as to call being back to school refreshing, but it was nice not having to make a million decisions.

A few kids asked what he did over the three days, which was a joke. He told them he'd watched TV and went to the library once, and that was the truth.

The only stressful part of being back was what to do about Hailey. She'd been texting him on Wednesday after he returned, and then it tapered off yesterday, mostly likely because he wasn't answering her.

They'd obviously kept up some kind of friendship, in the *revised* world these last two months. Pike wasn't sure how he felt about that. She was a nice kid, they'd had a good time that Saturday when he had those hours to kill before the incident, and she was good to him when he stopped over at her babysitting gig after he thought he'd been successful in saving her mom.

Today there'd be situations when he'd run into her. He supposed he could talk to her, and by being a little cagey could find out straight-up what was going on.

Or he could pretend he didn't see her, and not deal with any of it, which seemed easier and a lot more reasonable, and the day passed smoothly, without any more texts and without any drama.

When Pike was downtown yesterday at the library he spotted a new ice cream place. He wasn't sure if the place only opened up in this new reality, or if it had been there for a while before, and he just hadn't noticed it. But that wasn't the point, today he felt like some, so stopped there on the way home from school.

Of all people, there was Hannamaker inside at one of the little metal tables, by himself, polishing off some type of large sundae.

Pike tightened up for a second and then remembered *no*, he had no issue with the guy at this point. He hadn't muscled in on Audrey, and he hadn't had to fight the guy at the water fountain and mess up his jaw.

So he sat down with him. "Hey Gillette, sup." Jack said.

"This place been here long?" Pike said.

"A couple weeks I think. All pretty good, but anything with white chocolate is money."

"That's not even chocolate," Pike said. "It's fake vanilla. All marketing."

"So *don't* then." Hannamaker had an amused look. Pike thought he probably wasn't a bad guy.

"Lemme . . . run something by you, if you don't mind," Pike said.

"Yeah?"

"You know Hailey Milburn, right? Audrey's sister?"

"Duh, what do you think?"

"Am I going out with her, would you say?"

Hannamaker stopped feeding his face for a second and stared at Pike. "How should I know. You tell *me*."

This was an answer Pike didn't expect. He said, "You mean, it's not obvious, one way or the other?"

"Man," Jack, "I seen you playing tennis with her one time. Didn't know that was your sport, by the way, I think I'd stick with football . . . What it is, past that, that's *your* business."

"Oh," Pike said. *Jeez*, so maybe they just hit tennis balls around. Not that he was much of a fan of the sport. But that would be good, if that was the extent of it.

"You all right?" Jack said. "You seem kinda *off*."

"Nah, sorry I'm good. What's up with you, anything?"

"Ah well I'm on my way to the music store. I gotta see if I can sell 'em back my drums."

"Tall Toad, you mean? I love that place. Why do you have to sell the drums?"

"The damn neighbors keep complaining. My old man, he read me the riot act."

"That's too bad. You play in school, the band or anything? You take lessons on 'em?"

"None of that. I just bang around. I like it though."

Pike always wanted to play drums himself. His parents made him take piano lessons when he was a little kid and that never jived. He never seemed to have enough money to buy a drumset, or when he did, something was in the way.

“Okay I’m thinking out loud here now,” Pike said. “We have a basement, it’s pretty quiet down there . . . you could stick them there for a while, if you want.”

“Heck. You sure about that? What about your folks, and stuff?”

“That won’t be an issue, they don’t go down there much.”

“Yeah, but the noise.”

Pike was picturing his parents these days, pretty sure the last thing they’d be worrying about, or even noticing, was someone playing drums in the basement. “Like I said,” Pike said.

“Damn,” Jack said. “You’re a good man, you know it? . . . Thank you.”

If Pike didn’t know better, this whole conversation was taking place in the Twilight Zone. Hannamaker, of all people, now sort of his buddy.

“So,” Pike said, “you want to deal with it now?”

“Hey, if you got the time . . . definitely.”

Pike followed Jack over to his house. He lived over on Mercer Street, in what they called the M section. Pike’s impression was in the heyday, when the neighborhood was developed new, and fresh, it probably had a good vibe, but right now most of the houses were kind of shabby and run down. More than a few of them had old cars jacked up in the driveways, that would never be going anywhere.

The next door neighbor had a couple of pit bulls running around in a front yard that didn’t look all that well fenced in. When they got in the house Pike asked if those were the people complaining about the drums.

“Other side,” Hannamaker said. “My old man’s got issues with both of them though, plus a guy across the street.”

There were pizza boxes and beer bottles in the living room that hadn’t been disposed of, and there was the lingering smell of cigarette smoke. The far wall had been exposed down to the studs and had plastic sheeting on it, as though some repair or renovation was theoretically going to take place.

They went down the hall to one of the bedrooms and the drum set was crammed in the corner. There was a set of bunk beds and what looked like an air mattress situation on the floor.

“Tight in here,” Jack said.

“Gee, yeah,” Pike said. “Tight just to live, forget about the drums.”

“One’s my brother, the other’s my step-brother. You get used to it.”

Seeing this made Pike feel a little guilty about his own situation, which was positively luxurious by comparison. He also felt worse now about breaking the guy's jaw, though thankfully that hadn't happened, in the end.

It was a nice simple old-fashioned drum kit, a snare, bass, air tom, floor tom, hi-hat, and crash and ride cymbal. Pike had fooled around in Tall Toad on those electronic kits, where you could put on headphones and not bother anyone, but they weren't the same animal.

They got the drums out of there and back to Pike's and they carried them down to the basement. Hannamaker looked around and said, "Dang, this is a sweet set-up."

Pike hadn't thought about it too much, didn't spend a lot of time down here, but could see that, yeah, it wasn't bad.

"I'm just remembering," he said, "the last time I was even down here was probably with my old girlfriend, Cathy. It was sort of chaotic upstairs one night so we came down."

"It's kind of fixed-up though," Jack said. "You *sure* I'm not intruding, or anything?"

"Don't worry about it. My dad finished off part of it years ago, and then that was it. I guarantee the only time anyone'd come down here is if something went wrong with the furnace."

Hannamker said, "Cathy? You mean Carlisle? She's a pretty hot little number."

"Yeah we hooked up over the summer. Didn't last too long, she dumped me."

"I got dumped too," Jack said. This part was weird, kind of hard to take.

"So where do think's the best place?" Pike said.

"Well I'd say definitely in the back, where it's just cement. I'd feel better about being out of everyone's way, just in case."

They set up the drums back there and Pike found an old piece of carpet to wedge under the bass drum so nothing slid around when you used the kick-pedal. Hannamker picked up the sticks and started playing, trying to keep the noise level down. Pike didn't know a lot about music, but he could tell Jack wasn't bad, he had some talent.

When Jack stopped Pike said, "Don't hold back. I'm telling you, you're not going to disturb a single person . . . In fact we can get some speakers down here and crank up the music and play along, that's a lot of fun."

Hannamaker wasn't convinced. "I hear what you're saying, but I don't know. I'm not comfortable letting loose. Plus you got neighbors as close I do, and what if I want to play at night or something? Your whole family's gonna be right upstairs, even if I believe you that they don't come down here. It just doesn't sit right."

Pike had a thought developing. "Are you handy?" he said.

"I can usually figure it out. Why?"

"So . . . why don't we box it up then? Put up some walls and shit, close it off."

"Hmm . . . and throw in some insulation? That'd have me feeling a whole lot better, to be honest."

"What do we got, do you think, in terms of expense?" Pike still had most of the hundred dollars he'd nabbed from his dad, in case he needed it for a motel during his back travel. This would technically be a home improvement, wouldn't it, so what the heck.

"Don't worry about any of that," Jack said. "My uncle's a contractor. He's got a garage full of loose stuff we can have. All's we need, some 2 x 4s, sheetrock, some fasteners, a little paint, maybe borrow an air gun from my uncle to to secure the bottom stud-plates to the concrete."

"Plus some insulation of course, for the sound-proofing you're so worried about," Pike said.

"Yeah, for sure . . . the only thing, I'm not going to even *think* about this until I square it with your parents, face to face."

"Would calling 'em up work?"

"Okay, fine," Jack said.

Pike called his mom. There was an indoor pool next to the rec center, and she took Bo and Jackie there sometimes on Fridays. Pike got right to the point, ran it by her, and it didn't take long.

"We're good," he said. "It was like, 'whatever suits you, dear', or something pretty close."

"How about your dad though?"

"Nah, not necessary. He's kind of checked out, to be honest. I'm really not speaking to him much lately."

That hung for a second and Hannamaker was polite enough to leave it alone.

"So," Pike said, "what do you think, a week or two, we got this nailed?"

"Or we could take care of it tomorrow," Jack said.

Chapter 13

Pike made tentative contact with Hailey early Saturday morning. He sent her a text, asking if there was tennis today, hoping her answer would shed some light.

He wondered, *maybe did I join that lame tennis group at school?*, where I met Hailey that Saturday morning on Mr. Milburn's bicycle. Now that football was over, he definitely had time on his hands, and all bets were off.

Of course Hailey got back to him in about thirty seconds. She didn't say anything about tennis, she only told him they needed to talk, and Pike didn't care for that reply.

One thing he was learning, if there was bad news or surprising news or any other news, your best best is meet it head-on. He'd been ducking things in that regard the last couple days.

So he told her he'd be over at her house in 20 minutes.

It was strange to keep showing up at the Milburns'. It was like, *what's the story going to be this time?*

It was eerie to think that just a couple days ago, at least in real time, he was speaking to Mrs. Milburn in the side yard, and she went in the house to get him an iced tea.

This time Hailey met him out front. She started to say something and Pike held up his hand and interrupted her with, "I'm listening to you, but before you get into it--did you fill out a piece of paper for me, where I asked a bunch of questions about your family history?"

"Of course I did," Hailey said. "What's *wrong* with you? . . . Don't you remember, I asked my dad and he didn't want to deal with it, so I had my sister help me, and she didn't know much either."

"Oh, is that how it worked."

"Yes. You were irritated. I still don't understand what the big deal was."

"Did I . . . drive you to L.A? Manhattan Beach?"

"Pike, what on earth are you talking about?"

This was a relief. "I'm just messing with you," he said. "So what's up?"

Hailey was rubbing her hands together and stared down at her feet.

"This is awkward," she said. "Jamie Newsome asked me out. For tonight. I've been stalling him . . . Should I go?"

“Of course,” Pike said. “What’s the problem?”

Hailey started to cry. “That’s what I thought you’d say,” she said.

Pike felt bad, like maybe he should give her a pat on the back or a hug, but he definitely didn’t want to open any can of worms either.

She said, “You *know* I’ve been leaving all kinds of hints out there . . . Or maybe you don’t, maybe I’ve just been a total fool.”

Pike was getting the idea now, he was pretty sure.

“You’re a great kid,” he said. “I’m just not into a relationship right now. And honestly, especially with a sophomore.”

“Kid . . . thanks a lot.”

“Hail, come on . . . When I’m 26, and you’re 24? Who knows? Right now we’re just on different planes.” Pike was thinking, *and that’s a heck of an understatement.*

Hailey had stopped crying, as though she was accepting her fate, and was dabbing her eyes. “Does that mean we’re done playing tennis?” she said.

“No way,” Pike said, brightening up. “You have to promise to stop kicking my ass though.”

That got her laughing at least a little, and Pike told her to have fun tonight and to stay safe, and she went back in the house.

Pike drove out of there and took stock of the situation. Thank god he’d established that. Their interaction back then had obviously triggered something which sustained itself the last couple months, but luckily it had just been a friendship, centered mostly around tennis apparently. No trip to Manhattan Beach together either, which certainly, in the original case, Audrey’s, meant more than simple friendship.

Jack was going to be showing up around 11. He said he could borrow his uncle’s work truck and had everything under control, and all Pike really had to do was let him in.

Pike wanted to help out more than that of course, but meanwhile he had an hour . . . so why not look around Chico a little bit?

Meaning, Street View, a map, whatever else.

He entered the address that the librarian gave him, and he ran it through twice to make sure, but it was a UPS store now, and the whole block looked commercial, like everything had been razed and replaced by a strip mall. *What could you do? Things change.*

It shouldn't matter of course. It was a small city, not all that much larger than Beacon really, that should be easy enough to navigate and run into the Milburns one way or another. You didn't have to see the actual house in advance, or apartment, or whatever it was.

One serious concern that had been eating at him the last couple days was did he truly think he was capable of *timing* it?

It was one thing to go back a day, or even two months, which didn't seem like that huge a deal now.

But now we're talking 1993, aren't we? So from 2016 that's what, 23 years?

How would you *land* on that? It seemed as imposing as closing your eyes and trying to hit a specific number on a roulette wheel in a casino.

You had a window, of course, because if you missed '93 and instead arrived there in '92, or maybe even '94, the Milburns should still be around, since they lived there for few years.

But even so, back a couple decades, it was a damn *tight* window.

The other thing of course . . . should he miraculously make it, then how do you *handle* it? Meaning . . . how do you stop Audrey's parents from moving back to Beacon?

This seemed frankly ridiculous, what Pike was contemplating, the sanity of it all.

Meanwhile, there was the rumbling of a diesel truck outside and he looked out the window and there was Hannamaker, all loaded up.

"You have to return this?" Pike said.

"No, my uncle's not working today, so we can relax. The one thing I forgot, which I can't believe I didn't think of, a door . . . Dang it."

"Jeez, that's a good point . . . But can we start off, at least?"

"Yeah, we'll have to," Jack said. "I heard you ended it with Hailey. Before it even started."

"Wow . . ." Pike said. "You're tossing that at me out of the blue? How's something like that get around?"

"I actually called Audrey about something. Unimportant. We're not getting back together, or anything like that."

"You never know," Pike said, even though it killed him. "Put a little distance on the situation, maybe you'll work it out."

Jack said, "She likes *you* by the way. I can tell."

"Wait a second . . . how's that?"

"Don't worry about it . . . If it's meant to be, then you'll know."

“That really helps me, thanks.”

“I’m serious,” Jack said. “My grandma, she used to always say, *things happen for a reason*. I thought it was bullshit, but I’ve seen it applied to situations.”

“That type stuff,” Pike said, “I always thought was off the deep end. If you put a gun to my head, I guess I’m a little more open-minded to it now.”

“Let’s get started,” Jack said.

Hannamaker knew what he was doing. First they built the stud walls, three of them, since they’d be using the existing basement wall as the fourth. They cut the 2 x 4’s and attached them sixteen inches apart, and then they installed them in place. Jack had a fancy stud finder which he used to tie into the ceiling joists, and that heavy duty air driver worked great on the floor, since you were blasting nails into the cement to secure the bottom sills.

“This looks tremendous, actually,” Pike said. “What about the drums, though?”

“Fuck,” Hannamker said. They’d closed off the area without putting the drumset in it.

“Couple of *idiots*,” Pike said. “Although I guess we were thinking we’d leave space for a door, right?”

Jack had a scowl on his face and was dismantling part of the job so they’d have an opening for the drums. It took him a while, and he had to use a crow bar for part of it.

“There,” Jack said finally.

Pike said, “What I’m thinking? We stick in the drum kit, we forget about any door, we close up the sucker as-is.”

“Yeah, right. Except for the one thing, how *we* actually get *in*.”

“So what we do . . . we leave a panel on top that we can flip up. Then we climb through that way.”

Jack laughed. “Man, you don’t know the first thing about construction do you?”

“No.”

Hannamaker took a second. “That’s the stupidest idea I’ve heard in a long time . . . But let’s do it.”

“Really?”

“As a kid I always wanted a fort. It never worked out. I’m thinking, this would kind of be like that.”

“I wanted a fort too,” Pike said.

“Of course, aren’t we a little old for this shit?”

Pike didn’t say anything, so Jack didn’t answer the question either.

By dinner-time they'd finished with the insulation and sheetrock and it didn't look half-bad. There was still the issue of that panel.

"How would you work it?" Jack said. "I'm getting tired, I'm not thinking straight here."

"You're asking *me*? I don't know . . . some hinges or something. And a little handle?"

"Okay probably, yeah . . . I gotta be honest, I'm starved off my ass, I can't keep it up until I eat."

Pike said, "Dude, you're speaking to the converted. I'll treat you." Thinking, though did he still have enough left over of what he grabbed from his dad.

Pike drove, and they settled on In-n-Out. It wouldn't have made sense to go that far, the fifteen miles out to the interstate, except Hannamaker thought of a couple more items they should pick up at Home Depot, which was out there too.

"That feels a lot better," Jack said, after they'd both polished off multiple burgers and fries, and Pike said, "Don't you know it."

The thing now was to get some rope and couple of heavy gauge eye-hooks, plus the hinges and the handle, and they scoured the aisles at Home Depot. No one working there seemed to know where anything was, but Hannamaker found what they needed and they drove back to Pike's to finish the damn job.

When they pulled up, Cathy, of all people, was getting back in her car at the bottom of the driveway, ready to leave, since apparently she'd found no one home.

"What the heck," Pike said.

"Hey," she said.

"You might as well come in," he said. "Jack here, and me, we've got a little project going . . . You know Jack, right?"

Cathy said of course she did and she and Hannamaker kind of nodded at each other.

"I'll show you what we got," Pike said.

"There's a lot of debris, and of course we have to spackle and paint everything," Jack said when they got back down to the basement.

"What he's saying," Pike said, "is if you look past that, we have a sweet little set-up here."

Cathy said, "I'll say. How cool . . . except how do you get in?"

"Over the top," both Jack and Pike said at the same time, like it was obvious.

Cathy couldn't exactly picture that one. She said, "Anyhow . . . no real reason I came by, except I've been . . . you know . . . curious how things are going for you."

“Well that’s nice of you,” Pike said. “Before we get into that, you’re still going with Julio Sandoval?”

Cathy was cautious. “As far as I know . . . why?”

Pike said, “Because my friend Jack here, he says you’re a hot little number.”

“Don’t play with me,” she said, but both Pike and Jack were staring at her now, watching her reaction, and she was turning red.

“Let’s go upstairs for a second,” Pike said, “Jack keep working, don’t take any breaks, I’ll be right back.”

It was Saturday night and there was no one around upstairs and they sat in the living room. “You had to embarrass me like that?” Cathy said. She didn’t seem too upset.

“He’s into you, what can I say. I give him credit.”

Pike hadn’t thought of this before, but if Cathy dumped Julio, and Jack and she hooked up, that might open the door for Pike to approach Audrey. Right now he was feeling too guilty about that prospect, since, for better or worse, he was starting to genuinely like Hannamaker.

Then again, in the highly unlikely event he managed to get to Chico and screw up the Milburns’ future Beacon plans, that might be a moot point.

Cathy said, “I wonder about you, like every week . . . Is everything still the same?”

“Honestly?” Pike said. “I might be getting used to it. There’s positives and negatives. A lot of cons of course, but a few pros too.”

“Well did your meeting with Reggie help? Was there any follow-up to that?”

Pike didn’t see any benefit in telling her too much, such as all the details with Mitch honing in on the silver, and he certainly didn’t want to unleash the time travel business on her, even though it was she who actually planted the possibility in his head by telling him Reggie’s brother claimed to have done it.

“One thing that’s *mostly* a positive,” Pike said. “I met someone.”

“Oh,” Cathy said, a touch of jealousy in her tone, which is the way things usually worked, even though you’d broken up.

“Naw, not like that,” Pike said. “Someone with my scenario. Out of state. I went and saw her once, we keep in touch . . . the encouraging part, she’s had it for a while.”

“How long?”

“I think June of last year is when it surfaced. If you can believe it, she was in one of those bike-spin classes and stuff started smoking. It’s kind of funny now, to think of. Everyone looking around, wondering what the heck is going on.”

They could hear some pounding downstairs, Jack finishing things off.

“Gosh . . . so . . . that’s like 15 or 16 months before *your* discovery?”

“Yeah. And nothing’s changed, she’s fine . . . healthy as an ox actually.” *Which was a serious understatement.*

“How old is she?”

“I think 26.”

“I see. So . . . yeah . . . that’s good then Pike.”

“What you’re saying,” Pike said, “it’s good I’m not deteriorating then. At least most likely.”

“You know that’s not where I’m going with it.”

“Don’t worry about it, I’m just giving you a hard time. But I’ll admit, it’s helped me a little, to stop freaking out.”

“And she goes to work and all like a normal person? And keeps it a secret like you?”

“Exactly. Though she has to watch herself. I mean *I* drive down to L.A., I get in brutal traffic because two bozos are arguing in the middle of the street, I lose my cool and sort of flip one dude back into his car.”

“Please be careful.”

“I know, that was dumb . . . but in her case, if she pulled something like, as a woman, then it would really stand out, and the authorities would be on her.” *No kidding.*

“And . . . you’re *into* her, it sounds like . . . to use your expression.” Cathy was smiling, teasing him the way she did sometimes when they were together.

“I’m not going to dignify that with an answer,” Pike said. “But come here.”

They held each other for a minute. “Something else now,” he said. “I’m going to be doing something maybe a little dicey, coming up.”

Cathy didn’t say anything.

“But you sort of knew that might happen, at some point, right?”

“I think I did.”

“So I’m going to turn it around on *you*. Stay safe.”

“I will,” she said, and she kissed him quickly and hard, and said good night.

Chapter 14

It took Pike a few minutes to get back into the project and go down to the basement. That had been an emotional little episode with Cathy in the end, and totally unexpected. Obviously if his thing never happened they might still be together right now, but the cold fact was it *did*, and they weren't, and that wasn't going to change.

Hannamaker was making a lot of progress. There was a thick rope now hanging outside the structure, which was the idea.

"Dang," Pike said.

"Well I figured we need two of 'em," Jack said, "so I installed the eye-hooks into the ceiling joists. You could tie a small car to the rope now, and it would hold."

Pike tried the robe. There was some technique involved, holding your feet right going up, and going hand over hand coming down so you didn't rope-burn yourself.

"I haven't climbed one of these since middle school," he said.

"I haven't either," Jack said. "Now you get to the top, you flip open the panel, you dive through and grab the other rope and you're in . . . Piece of cake essentially."

Of course Pike could climb the thing one handed if he wanted, and be sitting inside playing the drums in about a second and a half, but what fun would *that* be?

"The only thing now," Jack said, "besides of course painting the outside--"

"*Forget* about painting the outside. But I know what you're really thinking, get in there and let's see how loud it is."

Jack put down his tool belt and hauled himself up top and twisted and grunted a little, but a moment later had disappeared under the little flap panel and was in.

"We're good," Pike said. "I can't hear a thing."

"Except I'm not playing yet, idiot," Jack said. Pike knew he wasn't but it was nice to be having some good old fashioned fun. Jack started banging around and you could definitely hear it, but it sounded very far away.

Jack reappeared out of the hatch and waited and Pike gave him two thumbs up. "One more thing," Pike said, "I've been meaning to mention, I found an extra key to the outside

door. Right over there, behind the furnace? You go around the side of the house is all . . . Help yourself, any time.”

“Wow, man, thanks . . . this is like Christmas.”

Pike was picturing Hannamaker’s home situation, which didn’t look all that inviting. “And if you’re ever . . . like playing late, or something, and you don’t want to bother going all the way home, you can sleep on the couch,” Pike said, pointing across the basement. “There’s pillows and a sleeping bag in that cabinet . . . And an old bathroom but it works.”

Jack seemed kind of blown away. “I don’t know what to say,” he said.

“Don’t be crazy. Plus you’re helping me out too, if you want to know the truth.”

“I am?”

“Sure. I got access to a drumset, I learned a lot of construction today, and . . . what was the other thing I was thinking?”

“You got to pay for dinner? That helped you out too?”

“Oh yeah . . . the other thing is you helped me kill a Saturday night, without feeling sorry for myself that I don’t have a date.”

“Speaking of that,” Jack said, “that was interesting. She just happened to be in the neighborhood I guess, *curious how things are going.*”

“Okay, knock it off.”

“No, I’m serious, they don’t just do that shit by accident.”

“It’s complicated, and not even close to what you’re thinking . . . But okay I’ll throw *you* one personal bone. She’s with Julio Sandoval. But . . .”

“That’s what I kind of deduced. The Venezuelan kid who plays soccer, right?”

“Right. The crux of it is, I’m not sure he’s completely floating her boat.”

“Oh,” Jack said.

“So anyway . . . you hungry, by any chance?”

“I tell you, I am. Must have been all this work.”

“How about Wendy’s?” Pike said.

“I’m down.”

“Then maybe we can pop into the go-kart place, take a few laps. Clarke works there, so we’re in clean.”

“I’m down for that too,” Jack said.

They were getting in the truck and Pike said, “This is out of left field. But did I rough up Mr. Foxxe at the skate place?” Pike had been trying to avoid thinking whether the incident happened the second time around, but his curiosity was getting to him.

Luckily Hannamaker wasn't thrown off. “I guess it's a question of interpretation,” he said. “But as far as scaring the asshole half to death, you got *that* right.”

Now that Pike had the answer, he was glad he asked.

Chapter 15

Sunday afternoon, there wasn't a whole lot else to do, so Pike called Mitch.

"Howdy," Mitch said. "I'm driving."

"Okay I'll call you back," Pike said, "no big thing."

"Nah I'm good, there's barely anyone within a hundred miles. I'm in the desert, west of Phoenix."

Pike said, "Well, I guess I have one tidbit you might be interested in."

"Okay before you get to that," Mitch said. "I'm real excited. I think I've found someone who lived in the town, Hillsdale, back in the day."

"Good for you, whoopee," Pike said. *Honestly?* What Mitch might or might not turn up about a supposed UFO possibly messing with a silver mine 60 years ago, and on and on . . . It was interesting in the beginning, but it was becoming more and more irrelevant. The fact was, Pike was stuck with this endowment now, and all this historical stuff wasn't going to change it.

"Yeah, well it's got *me* fired up," Mitch said. "Don't you want to know how I found this person?"

"Melinda still there too?" Pike said, hoping to sidetrack him.

"No, she got burned out. She flew home last week."

"Then summarize your deal quick," Pike said, "and I'll fill you in on mine, and we can call it a day."

"Well the short answer? There were only a few families left at that point, like I might have told you, after the mine abruptly shut down. All dead ends except for one, the granddaughter of one of the last residents. I found her . . . you don't want to hear how, but it was a lot of steps and a little luck."

"Yeah?" Pike said, "you found her, and so what?"

"That's what I would think too," Mitch said. "Except I get her on the phone, she's suspicious at first and then relaxes and before I know it we're shooting the basic breeze back and forth. She's about my age now, maybe a few years older."

"Come *on*."

“I build up to it slow. I want to win her trust, if you get where I’m going . . . So finally I ask her matter-of-factly if her grandpa ever mentioned a UFO stopping by.”

“You’re drawing it out again,” Pike said, “you always do this.”

“She doesn’t answer.”

“Because it’s a ridiculous question. She’s starting to relax that you’re semi-normal, and then you spring that on her.”

“Yes, but it wasn’t like that. I phrased it a few different ways. My strong impression was she may *have* an answer but she’s not comfortable issuing one.”

“Jeez-Louise, *issuing*,” Pike said. “So let me guess, you’re heading her way now. For a face-to-face.

“So we’ll see,” Mitch said. “Yes. She lives in a town called Anthem, I guess sort of a retirement village. Her name is Lucy . . . You have all the information, in case I disappear, never to be heard from again.” There was a muffled chuckle.

“Wow, what was that,” Pike said, “some attempted humor? Out of character for you.” Though he was thinking, it wasn’t all that funny as it might apply to *him* soon, the *in case I disappear* part.

“So enough about me,” Mitch said.

“Well I hope you have fun, and find what you’re after . . . Now you remember Dani, of course, right?”

“No.”

This was getting so out of hand, Pike couldn’t keep straight who he’d told what, and who he’d held stuff back from.

He said, “That doesn’t matter. Bottom line, I might have made a connection with someone. A policeman’s wife . . . She’s his widow actually. But what may have happened, it sounds like, they donated his organs while he was on life-support.”

It took Mitch a moment. He said, “I’d ask you why you’re telling me this. But I’m assuming there’s more to it.”

“Yeah, I meant to throw it in up front. Everything I’m hearing, the guy had my deal.”

“Meaning . . . super strength . . . plus the psychic time travel prowess?”

Pike didn’t think of it as *psychic*, except for maybe the deep visualization part that got you there. Hopefully Mitch wasn’t *still* hung up on whether he’d really been somewhere, though Pike was pretty sure he’d convinced him by now.

“No one mentioned the travel, but the strength part, yeah,” Pike said.

“What did he do to demonstrate that, this fellow?”

“Okay, don’t make me waste time, here . . . The thing of it is, what I’m slightly red-flagging about, is whoever got those organs, is everything hunky dory?”

“In other words . . . are any of them now similarly empowered as well?” Mitch said.

“That . . . or it possible the thing *mutated*, or some shit?”

Mitch thought about it. “You raise an intriguing scenario . . . One would think, based on our Texas friend’s experience of removing his own filling, that a transplant in and of itself--unless it was the actual *tooth* being transplanted--wouldn’t carry with it any residuals.”

“But the blood and stuff,” Pike said.

“I agree,” Mitch said. “It’s not clear-cut. Please forward to me all the information you have, it’s certainly something we’d be advised to monitor.”

“All right then. Happy trails, or whatever.”

“You too. What’s your week look like? Pretty routine?”

“More or less, yeah,” Pike said. “Me and another guy, we boxed in a little drum room, and I’m probably heading to Chico in a few days.”

“Drive carefully, then.”

It went right past Mitch, which Pike decided was just as well.

Monday after school he went back to see his friend the librarian.

“You’re a nice woman,” Pike said. “You always have time for me.”

He was standing at her desk and she motioned for him to sit down. “And you’re a polite young man,” she said. “However, how important, really, does what it looks like I’m doing seem?”

“You jumbled that up on me a little,” Pike said. “But I hear you. If you just sat there and Tweeted your friends all day, people would still be checking out books without major issues, I guess.”

“They wouldn’t miss a beat,” she said. “One of my duties is ordering, which requires me staying abreast of new releases. Frankly though, most stories have already been told.”

“I see what you mean . . . Too much recycling the old themes. TV’s the same way I guess. I wouldn’t have thought so, but then I’ll see a re-run of an old show, the kind of thing my parents like, and I’ll say *wait a second, Game of Thrones just stole that.*”

“I don’t watch television, I’m afraid,” she said.

“Well where do you live?” Pike said. He was in one of those moods, where you just let it all hang out.

The librarian stood up and said, “Actually, I have a break coming up. I can take it a bit early, and we can speak in the lounge.” Pike followed her to yet another corner of the library, this time to a brightly-lit room with a sink and a microwave and a vending machine.

“You’re going to laugh,” she said. “I live with my mom.”

“Well . . . I’m sure that happens,” he said. “How *old* are you?”

The librarian smiled. “37. There was a time when it was off-limits to ask a woman her age. These days, all bets are off.”

“So . . . if you want to have kids . . . don’t you have to get moving on it pretty quick?” He couldn’t believe how obnoxious he was being. It was just kind of pouring out.

“That’s a fair question,” she said. “But I’m not going to have children. Even when I was married, we were on the same page in that regard.”

Pike helped himself to a glass of water from a paper cup. “You can tell I’m stalling,” he said.

“Not at all,” she said. “I enjoy our conversations quite a lot . . . Needless to say, I envy you, with so many experiences and surprises ahead.”

Pike said, “If I was going to . . . you know . . . try to travel again . . . you’re looking at me funny.”

“No I’m not.”

“You completely changed your expression.”

“Perhaps. Only because of the shift to more serious subject matter.”

“Oh . . . anyway, how would you pinpoint the timing? I mean I’ve got parts of it down, but then again I feel like I’m closing my eyes and hoping, **like I’m doing a pin the tail on the donkey thing?** It’s scary like that too . . . I mean do you understand where I’m coming from? Does that make sense?”

The librarian had a calm voice and a gentle manner. “It’s all right,” she said.

They sat there quietly for a minute. “Do you want me to try it again?” Pike said.

“Please.”

“Well I want to go 1993. If I miss my *location* that’s probably not the end of the world, but the *time frame* is something else again.”

“And you’re aiming to follow the rules? From the leather book?”

“As best I comprehend them yes . . . Not sure if I explained it, but what you do, you use your mentality to initiate the transport. I know that sounds ridiculous.”

“Please continue,” the librarian said.

“So say I’m going back a couple weeks. If I hold a specific event in my head--like for example a bunch of us went to the races at the fairgrounds on a Saturday night two weeks ago, and we knew one of the guys driving, and he came in third in his heat, and the sights and sounds and smells are familiar and right in your face--then you have a decent shot at landing it.”

She took her time digesting this. “1993 then, by contrast,” she said, “wouldn’t have a similar component. Is that it?”

“Yeah. I mean I wasn’t even born until ‘99. There’s nothing I can come up with, to connect to back then.”

Pike could tell she was thinking pretty hard.

Finally she said, “I must get back. If you’d like to call me later, I might have a recommendation for you.” She wrote down her number, and without any fanfare, went back to work.

Pike got home around 5, and coming up the driveway he could hear what must be Hannamaker playing the drums. A, the guy was impressive, he definitely had some natural talent, and B, you had to strain to hear much, meaning their insulation job was pretty damn successful.

He got in the house, wolfed down a tamale that happened to be sitting there on the counter and looked perfectly fine, and went downstairs.

There was the rope staring you in the face, and he scaled it, dove through the hatch and sat down to listen to Jack. They had added some floor pads to the drum room, which they had started referring to as *The Box*, so you had room to sit down, or even lie down if you wanted.

It was kind of an oasis actually, you didn’t need to always be playing drums to appreciate being in there.

Jack finished off his groove with a buzz roll and a cymbal crash and said hi. Pike may have been reading him wrong, but he sure seemed in a particularly upbeat mood.

“Yo, what’s up man?” Pike said.

“I’m good,” Jack said. “Fired up actually. Thanks.”

Pike assumed he meant thanks for helping with a solution for the drums, so he wouldn’t have to sell them back to Tall Toad Music. But that wasn’t it.

“She’s a really nice girl,” Jack said. “What can I say, it’s picked up my game.”

“Speak English here,” Pike said, scrunching up his face and squinting at Hannamaker. “What the heck you talking about?”

“Gee. I guess word doesn’t get around as much as I thought. Thanks to you, that little tip you gave me, I’m hooked up with Cathy now.”

“*What?*”

“Why are you surprised? You’re the one told me, the dude wasn’t floating her boat.”

“Okay fine,” Pike said, “but I didn’t expect you to *act* on it like that. Point-blank. Jeez . . .”

“Wow . . . Sorry, then.”

Pike picked up a loose drumstick and starting twirling it around.

“Nah, that’s on me,” he said. “I would have done the same thing.”

“I mean why waste time?” Jack said. “If you’re contemplating something anyway.”

“I agree,” Pike said. “Well good luck to you, dog.” They both stood up, and even though it was the last thing he felt like doing, Pike gave Jack a man-hug and a pat on the back.

They climbed their way out of The Box and Pike said, “Okay now to the important stuff. Where do you want to get something to eat?”

“Ah heck, I’d love to,” Jack said. “Except I’m picking up Cathy actually . . . This has been tremendous by the way, I got to come over for an hour *first* and play. There’s something therapeutic about it, at least in my case.” *The guy certainly was enthusiastic, wasn’t he?*

“Well, see you soon,” Pike said.

“Oh yeah, catch you tomorrow. If not here, then at school, whatever.” And Jack used the new private side entrance, which he seemed quite familiar with already, and he went bounding up the outside steps like a kid in a candystore.

Nobody’s fault, but it was pretty darn quiet right now in the basement.

Chapter 16

Pike got in his pickup and cruised around for a while. They were into December now, it was getting dark early, and people were bundling up, at least by central California standards.

He stopped for gas on 8th Street, and son of a gun, filling up across from him was that guy Henry who picked him up hitchhiking that time.

“What are you doing here?” Pike said. “You live in Uffington, right?”

“Another game at your gym,” Henry said. “Different daughter this time, my freshman. She hates it when I watch, so I drop here off and kill time, like getting gas.”

Pike flashed back to his own games, always thankful that his dad didn’t take it seriously and didn’t come unless Pike wanted him to, and even then his dad would never yell or cheer or draw dumb attention to himself like a lot of the parents.

He was so angry at him these days that it was easy to overlook some of the good qualities.

“Well how’s your brother?” Pike said, meaning the poor guy who had been crippled in the football accident, which according to Henry happened in his very first ever game.

“Not good, quite frankly.”

“Oh. You mean, even compared to last time? When you all gave me that ride?”

“He’s declined. His spirits are in the toilet . . . Then of course, the physical part--whatever he’s got left of it, which ain’t the greatest--that follows suit.”

As Pike was learning, there were minutes and hours and days . . . and then there were *moments*.

This was one of them. He said, “Can you please tell your brother . . . to just hold on? That we might be able to help him?”

Pike could see that Henry appreciated his spirit and didn’t want to challenge him, but he was clearly deflated.

There was a third car getting gas, a couple of kids Pike recognized, but they finished and left. It was just he and Henry for a minute. The little gas station convenience store had closed.

Pike said, “Can I ask you to trust me--please--that I might be able to help him? You don’t have to *believe* me, you just have to *trust* me.”

It was a screwball question, and Henry didn’t know how to respond. Pike stepped around the gas pump, peeked into Henry’s vehicle to make sure no one was in there, and crouched down low and came up with the side of the white Suburban in his hands. The thing was tilting way left, as though if Pike raised it up any higher it was going to flip.

Pike took one hand off it and the side of the SUV stayed where it was, four feet off the ground. He switched hands and nothing changed. He took a good, long look at Henry, who appeared to be peeing in his pants.

“Are we good?” Pike said, still tilting up the Suburban, about as effortlessly as you would hold open the lid of a kids’ toy box.

Henry’s eyes were wide and he mumbled that they were. Pike eased the vehicle back down.

“I can’t deal with him right now,” Pike said. “But tell your brother, when I’m able to, I’ll do my best. I *promise*.”

Henry didn’t say anything more, and got out of there pretty fast. There was always the chance that he would think Pike was a freak, to be avoided at all costs, but Pike could only hope that something registered.

It seemed about the right time to call the librarian. He wanted to give her room to think, so he didn’t want to bother her too early, but he didn’t want to be rude and risk waking her up either.

When she answered he said this was Pike, and then realized they didn’t know each other’s names, so he added: *your customer*.

“Hello there, I’m glad you called,” she said. “I’m Frankie, by the way.”

Pike said, “Gee. *Frankie*?”

“I know,” she said. “It’s technically Francesca . . . Listen, I have a few ideas for you. My day-off is Wednesday, we could meet at Starbucks if you like.”

Pike said that’d be fine, if he wasn’t putting her out. Frankie said it would be her pleasure, though not to expect a *panacea*. Pike was tempted to ask what that meant, but figured he could look it up and not embarrass himself. They agreed on 3:30.

Now what? The Chico business was weighing on him. There was a big-time fear of the unknown that had crept in. It wasn’t just, how would you get there on time (*and in one piece*, always a worry in the back in his mind).

It was also: If you *did* make it, how the heck do you work it from *there*?

Do you try to find the dude a job in another state and encourage him to take it? Maybe you try to break them up, young Mr. and Mrs. Milburn, nip the whole shebang in the bud, so they go off happily ever after with other people. Except then the one small detail, Audrey and Hailey wouldn't be around.

Or do you simply encourage them to settle down in Chico -- maybe maneuver something where they get a key to the city, or get honored at a parade, so they fall in love with the place and can't bear to leave.

Pike stopped himself and thought, *what are you doing, this is insane.*

The bottom line was he'd have to get there and wing it, take stock of the situation and use his best judgment. He was getting a headache.

Was it too late to swing by the Milburns'? Pike checked the time, it was 10:42. *Nah, why not?*

The house looked awfully dark as Pike came up the walkway and approached the front door, but he decided life's too short--so to speak--and if something seems important, don't wait on it.

It took a minute but Mr. Milburn answered, in his robe and slippers. "Come on in son," he said, sleepy but friendly. It didn't seem like he'd been drinking tonight, or if he had it had worn off.

Pike thanked him and took a seat in the living room and asked if Audrey was available. "I'm not sure, I'll check," Mr. Milburn said, and few minutes later she appeared, also in a robe and slippers.

She sat down. "Well this is certainly something different, on a Monday night," she said.

Pike said, "Everyone asleep early then, huh?"

"Apparently so," she said. "Since mom . . . I suppose we've lost a good deal of our motivation around here." She seemed so forlorn. So fragile. It was tough for Pike to take.

"I won't keep you," he said. "What did your parents do when they lived in Chico?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'll re-phrase it . . . What made them move there, and what made them move back to Beacon after those three or four years?"

"*Those* three or four years?"

"Yeah. That's what I need."

Audrey took a good look at him. She seemed more awake now. She said, "Pike you're a good guy. But how can I put this delicately? . . . Are you having any mental issues, at all?"

"Maybe. Why?" Giving her the straight face.

Audrey said, "If I get my dad, will that put to rest your concerns?"

Pike said it might, and she went and got Mr. Milburn. This was going to be awkward. "Sir," Pike began, "out of curiosity, Chico."

"Ah yes," Mr. Milburn said. "It's a fine town. Not particularly glamorous, but relatively stimulating, with the university there as a sort of anchor. Also *damn* hot in the summer, pardon my French."

Hmm. It was probably too simple, but Pike said, "That why you moved back to Beacon then? Those hot summers?"

"That might have played a part. Though we would have had to be in denial of course, since Beacon is crazy hot in the summer as well."

"So . . . what else would it have been? Why you didn't stay there?"

"This is getting, like, *way* off the charts," Audrey said.

"It's fine," Mr. Milburn said. "Ultimately, I believe all things being equal, we were comfortable raising a family here . . . Beacon is what we knew."

"But there was no, like, event?"

"That precipitated it? Well, no. But what may have accelerated things, I was working for an interstate trucking company, and they announced they were moving their base to Iowa."

"What was the name of the company?" Pike said.

"Oh my *God*," Audrey said.

"Sure, it was RJ Rangler and Sons."

"You mean wrangler, like in cowboying?"

"Spelled differently though. But yes, I always liked the name, I liked thinking of it that way too."

"So why didn't you go with them? To Iowa. I mean, if you could do it all over again . . . something you'd consider?"

"I don't believe so," Mr. Milburn said. "I enjoyed the job, such as it was, but it wasn't really a long-term fit."

"Oh," Pike said.

"Now you seem disappointed," Audrey said. "Like the air went out of a balloon."

“Just of of curiosity,” Mr. Milburn said, “it’s flattering of course, to be asked about, but why are you *interested?*”

Pike struggled with how to answer that one. You could go real different ways.

He made his decision. “It ties into something I’m trying to accomplish in my own life . . . I know that sounds awkward.”

“Not at all, son. Gathering as much as you can from others, I think that’s a wonderful approach to life . . . I’ve going to retire, and let you two finish up. Good night.”

“Good night, sir,” Pike said.

When he was gone Audrey said, “On the one hand, you’re a piece of work Gillette . . . On the other hand, that was mildly entertaining.”

Pike moved next to her and kissed her, and if she was flustered or uncomfortable, she didn’t show it.

“That was . . . surprising,” she said quietly.

“Shifting gears for a second,” he said, “what are the odds Hailey might walk in?”

“Please. What a mood killer.”

“I’m serious. I need to tell you something.”

“You’re fine. She goes to sleep early, and once she turns off the light that’s it.”

Pike put his arm around her. “Will you go out with me for two days?” he said.

“Very funny . . . The strange this is, I feel like I know you better than I do.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what happens when you’re in the same class all the way through. I mean, going back to kindergarten, Mrs. Chegwiddden . . . 6 years elementary, middle school at Brookhaven . . . the works.”

“No,” she said, “this feels different than that.”

Pike kissed her again, longer this time. “It does for me too,” he said.

Audrey said softly, “Please don’t go for a little while.”

Pike took a deep breath and *here goes*.

“What I need to tell you,” he said, “what I’m going to try to do . . . bring your mom back. I tried it once. I thought I had it, but it only held for four days, then it collapsed.”

“I’d ask you what on earth you’re talking about, but you’ve had me so off-balance tonight, I don’t know where to start,” she said.

“Just hear me out . . . If I make it this time, if it *works*--then we have the collateral damage. That’s the downside.”

“Unh-huh.”

“Which means I won’t have known you . . . You good with that?”

“Sure. Whatever you say, boss.” She put her feet underneath her and was nuzzling up to him now.

“Good then,” Pike said. “On a lighter note, are you still as amazing a student as you used to be? I mean are you still looking at fancy colleges and stuff?”

“I was. But I’m going to the JC, I’ve decided. I need to keep an eye on my dad.”

Pike realized this wasn’t a *lighter note* now, and he was kind of afraid to ask but he did anyway. “His legal problems, is he still in hot water?”

“Very much so. And of course the drinking, exacerbated by all the stress . . . Not sure if you heard about it, but in addition to the police issue, he’s now been served with a lawsuit by Mr. Foxe.”

“Unreal,” Pike said. “But not surprising . . . I’m telling you right now, if I can’t do what I was just talking about . . . then I’m gonna at least take care of Mr. Foxe.”

“Now let’s don’t fantasize about anything silly . . . please,” Audrey said. She had her head on his shoulder and her fingers were lightly stroking his chest.

“Your parents,” Pike said. “What would stop them from moving back to Beacon from Chico? Anything you can come up with along those lines?”

“Here we go again,” Audrey said. “But I talked to Jack at school by the way. He said you’re friends. I think he admires you.”

“Well Hannamker’s the type dude,” Pike said, “who you can roll both ways with. Fine line between getting along with him, and not.”

“Well the main thing,” she said, quietly again, “please don’t go anywhere right now.”

“Second request?” Pike said.

Pike pulled her a little closer and Audrey didn’t answer, and Pike realized she had her eyes closed. And for the moment, the world was a pretty simple place.

Chapter 17

Tuesday in second period, History, Mr. Waphley turned to write something on the blackboard, and at that point everyone checked their phones.

There was a text from Dani, from a half hour ago, which *never* happened, not this early on a school day. It said to call her, nothing more.

Pike tried her at lunch and it went to voice mail.

This was one more thing to be slightly concerned about now. He wanted to leave on Thursday with a clean slate if possible. Dani didn't return his call until late in the afternoon, when he and Hannamaker were hanging out in The Box.

"My lawyer knocked on my door this morning," she said. "They're close to charging me with a crime in Palm Springs . . . if you can believe it."

"What *kind* of crime?" Pike said.

"He says it's not exactly clear yet . . . It looks like I'm going to have to go back there. That should be fun." She sounded pretty scared.

"Are they going to . . . like, *hold* you or something?"

"The autopsy apparently came back inconclusive . . . but there may have been someone at the resort--the second one--who said they witnessed something."

"So? What did they witness?"

"No one's saying . . . I don't know why I'm laying this all you . . . Maybe I'm thinking I might need you to break me out of jail, or something." She was crying now. The irony, Pike thought, is she can break *herself* out of jail.

"Okay *Dani*. Take it easy . . . You're going to be fine. It's only because of what went down in Pocatello that they're even raising an eyebrow . . . Most important thing though, don't talk about it to anyone."

"I'm not."

"Even if you think they're your best friend. Like your lady in New York, the organ donor's wife . . . Do *not* let your guard down."

"Okay . . . How are *you*?"

“Don’t worry about that right now. I’ve got to take care of something this week. Hopefully . . . After that, you got my full attention.”

“That’s sweet of you,” she said. “I’m sure it’s a false alarm, my mind running away from me, is probably all.”

“When the dust settles, that type of thing usually is,” Pike said, having no idea what he was talking about but trying to help her relax.

Hannameker had been holding off playing the drums out of politeness, and when Pike and Dani hung up he played for a while and then stopped and said, “Dog I have to be honest with you -- what was *that*? You’re not going *gay* on me now or something, are you?”

Pike was still absorbing the phone call and was confused for a minute. “No, no,” he said. “That’s a gal. A girl, a woman, whatever . . . with an *i*.”

“Fair enough,” Jack said. “Plenty of surprises out of you though, I’m learning.” Giving him an amused look. “Let’s see, you had a crime, a witness, a Pocatello thing, an organ donor . . . what else?”

Jack was once again polite enough to not press the issue.

“So,” Pike said. “*Cathy* then. Another day in the books.”

“Yep. She’s actually going to stop by for a little while, if you don’t mind. She wanted to see the finished product, and maybe try to get inside the thing herself.”

“Sure, fine,” Pike said, though he was thinking that was a weird thing for her to want to do, climb into it.

“Hey listen,” Jack said. “I have to thank you once again. A lot of guys might hold a grudge, or whatever.”

“Oh no,” Pike lied. “Water under the bridge. Totally . . . This is gonna sound kind of crazy, but Audrey’s coming over too.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah. You know . . . she’s into seeing it too.”

“Hold your horses there, pardner. Something like *that*, it wouldn’t just materialize out of thin air.”

“No,” Pike said. “I forced the issue. Last night.”

“Holy Smokes,” Jack said, and he put his hands on his head and started pushing his hair back, his eyes big.

“If it’s any consolation,” Pike said, “she and I, there’s a chance at least, that it could be very short-lived.”

Hannamaker was cooling down a notch. “Nah, that’s my fault,” he said. “Don’t pay attention to anything I just said . . . God bless you, go for it.”

“Thanks . . . you eat?”

“Actually no, I haven’t.”

“I’ll go get a couple pizzas. You take it easy, play some more drums.”

“That’s all right, *I’ll* go,” Jack said.

“Nah,” Pike said. “You need to hold down the fort, so to speak. In case the two of them show up at the same time . . . Could be interesting.”

“Fuck you,” Jack said, but he was smiling, and Pike was pretty sure things were back to normal.

True to her word, Frankie the librarian came strolling into Starbucks on Wednesday at 3:30 on the button.

She took her coffee straight and black, which Pike admired. He couldn’t understand the appeal of all the goofy, sweet concoctions at Starbucks that were pretending to be coffee but were more like fake milkshakes.

In any case, Frankie got right down to business. She opened her laptop to something called the **California Museum of Top-40 Radio**.

“Before we take a look at specifics,” she said, “my thought was this: If you can narrow your timeline focus through the use of music, and events of the day, I believe you’ll avail yourself of the best opportunity.”

Pike was sort of following her, though it didn’t make a lot of sense. “You mean, figure out what songs they were playing back then?” he said.

“Yes,” she said, “but the idea is to try and utilize the whole package.” She started clicking around on the radio museum website. “Here, for instance,” she said. “KEWC, Sacramento. It’s one of the older stations on the west coast. The format now is talk, but in 1993 KEWC played hits of the day, as it was the tail-end of the top-40 radio era.”

Pike was thinking if Frankie was 37 now, she would have been a teenager back then, and probably listened to that stuff a lot.

She continued. “This is truly an amazing site, actually. As you can see, they’ve archived KEWC and several other stations. You can pick an exact week, and listen to their programming for one whole day, normally a Monday. Most of it has survived.”

As a demonstration she tried the week of June 21st, 1993. The KEWC morning DJ started talking, and then a song came on. It was set up like a podcast, where you could advance through the day, and there were different DJ shifts, with a new one starting up every three or four hours.

“But the music is essentially the same no matter what time you tune in,” Frankie said. “There was no wiggle-room. Stations were very much dependent on song charts to determine their playlists. They still are, at least those that remain standing.”

Pike was following along on his own computer. He heard snippets of two songs that he sort of knew, *Have I Told You Lately* by Rod Stewart, and *That’s The Way Love Goes* by Janet Jackson.

“Then there are the newscasts,” Frankie was saying. “A bit of a lost art today, with the proliferation of social media and such. KEWC had something called *20-20 Beat*, which meant there was a 3-minute newscast every 20 minutes. An element you might appreciate is the clean, clear diction of the typical reporter reading the news copy.”

“I don’t care about anyone’s diction,” Pike said.

“Certainly not, not as pertains to your project,” she said. “I just wanted to bring to your attention the contrast, what with 25 years later, the errors and overall sloppiness of our current media.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Pike said. “You want a refill? And how about a pastry or something, to go with it?”

“You’re sweet, but I’m fine . . . The larger point of course, is that the newscasts bring to light the events of the day.”

“So you’re saying . . . pick something that happened--something unique to back-then--pick a song, lump ‘em together, and away we go.”

“Essentially, yes. Naturally that is something . . . the *away we go* part . . . that only you can determine.”

Pike closed up his laptop. If he smoked cigarettes, now felt like a good time to light one up.

He said, “If we were sitting here last summer having this conversation, I’d put a call in to the authorities to have us both hauled off to a mental institution . . . Now, *what the heck, this sounds as good as anything else.*”

Frankie said, “I like your sense of humor, Pike.”

“The good part, if there is one? I seem to be pretty okay at making it back. So if I screw up the *outbound*, you’ll probably see me again . . . Of course if something did happen to go haywire with the *inbound*--you might not see me for 23 years.”

Pike was trying to figure it out, did it work that way? Or would the one hour per one day rule still be in effect, and in that case how old would he be in 2017 if he got stuck in 1993, and had to *live it out*.

It was too confusing, and what was the point? There *was* no point.

“One final question,” he said. “Not so much a question, more like something to run by you . . . who is an intelligent person who thinks I’m crazy but is kind enough to play along.”

“You may have me pegged incorrectly, your never know,” Frankie said, and she smiled. She was still being the objective librarian, which Pike could appreciate.

“My friend and I, we built this little structure in my basement. It’s cozy down there. I feel like I can clear my head.”

“A kind of sanctuary for you, it sounds like.”

“Maybe, yeah. When I’ve . . . traveled . . . so far, I’ve gone pre-1956. It’s a long story. That part seems insane . . . Among many other parts, of course, but forget those. The point is, can I go from down there? The Box, we call it.”

Frankie considered it. “I take it, the pre-1956 refers to the age of your starting point . . . If that’s the case, I don’t know that I would initiate a radical change.”

“So if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it . . . that’s how I was looking at it too, unfortunately.”

“Yet it occurs to me, are you certain how old your house is?”

“I think it was built in the ‘70s. My mom was always complaining about the avocado green all over the place, and finally my dad agreed and they changed it.”

“Is your house in a subdivision?”

“You mean like a tract neighborhood? No. It’s just on a regular All-American street, I guess you’d call it.”

“Are there variations in the ages of your neighbors’ homes? . . . What I’m getting at, is possibly your house replaced an existing one.”

“Wow . . . and *that* one may have been pre-1956. That’s not bad . . . How would I know?”

“I believe for starters you can examine the foundation. There’s also the assessor’s office, at City Hall.”

Pike was flashing on poor Mitch digging through all those records down in some out-of-the-way dusty place in New Mexico, for what seemed like weeks. But this was interesting.

“You’ve been great,” Pike said, and they both packed up their stuff and stood up. “I think that about covers it,” he said.

The librarian put her hand on his shoulder and looked him straight on, and it was a different look than he’d seen from her before. “Godspeed,” she said.

Chapter 18

First Pike needed to eat, and then he really did have to get down to business if he was actually going to take this little road trip tomorrow.

When he got home, Jack wasn't in the basement, or The Box, so Pike texted him to see if he wanted to grab something, but he said he was having dinner at Cathy's.

Pike thought about it, stopped himself, and then went ahead and called Audrey. She said she'd love to meet him, only she had a huge night of studying on her plate.

Of course she treated it like it was no big deal, as though she'd see him tomorrow at school, and they'd take it from there, and you couldn't blame her.

The other night, when Cathy and Audrey both came over, it started off weird, all four of them a little tight for their own reasons, but it ended up okay. The girls both made it over the top, into The Box, and Pike got a hold of a some beer from upstairs, and they told stories, and some of them were pretty dang funny. Especially Hannamker. Pike didn't know he had it in him.

Everyone stuck around until close to midnight, and Pike could see it was good for Audrey, that she needed more times like this, many more, where she could put the real world on hold.

Tonight though, was what it was. What could you do?

Pike settled on some microwavable potstickers from Costco upstairs which was a letdown but didn't waste much time.

He locked himself in his room and went back on that website, the top-40 radio museum deal. The example Frankie had run was June 21st, 1993, and that seemed decent, he couldn't see why another week would be any better. It would be the beginning of summer, but probably not as hot yet as Mr. Milburn complained about Chico being at its worst, and the days would be nice and long, in case that might help anything.

Audrey and Hailey would be out of school though for summer vacation, so that could complicate things a bit--*but wait a second*, there *were no* Audrey and Hailey up in Chico. Why he did keep getting mixed up on this stuff? The darn parents themselves would only be,

say 20, 21, if they graduated from Hamilton in 1990. Which is what Audrey told him in the car on the way home from Manhattan Beach, and hopefully that still held.

So yeah, what was wrong with that week in June? There was the slim possibility that the Milburns would have some vacation time around then and go someplace, but that was a chance you took, and even then you'd just most likely wait them out.

There was the Rod Stewart song, the Janet Jackson one, and another by Duran Duran that was familiar, that the station kept playing that day too.

The news part was all over the map. Pike kept skipping around on the podcast to different times of day, hoping to find something he could relate to. You had a major drug bust in Modesto, there was a rock concert in Sacramento where some idiot stalker delivered a pizza onstage naked, you had a shark attacking a surfer north of San Francisco. Three big rigs got into a jackknife thing together on Highway 80 outside Auburn, and there was a chemical spill involved, and a major traffic mess.

Nationally you had the usual announcements out of Washington, most of them as boring as watching paint dry. Bill Clinton was president, he'd been in there about six months. Either way, national news wasn't going to cut it for someone trying to land in Chico.

Then on one of the evening newscasts there was one more announcement, almost as an afterthought, that the Sacramento Hobies were on the road in Chico tonight for the start of a three-game series against the Buttes. *Jeez, these names*, but Pike assumed it was baseball and googled it.

The Western Straits League had apparently folded in the late '90's, but right now, in 1993, there was a minor league baseball game going on in Chico. It was an independent league, so not your typical match-up between the farm systems of two major league clubs, but from what Pike could gather, the quality of play was good, somewhere between between double-A and triple-A ball.

There was a photo of the stadium, if you could call it that, and it was a nice setting, with the far side, past the outfield wall, framed by surrounding orchards.

Today, according to google, the whole shebang had been converted to a business park, out off 20th street past the fairgrounds, and a lot of those orchards were gone.

Pike jumped ahead and found that on that night, Monday June 21st, Chico beat Sacramento 2-1 on a walk-off home run by Anthony Knight, who, as Pike kept searching, would go on to play two seasons with the Dodgers. There was a picture of the guy, smiling after the game, a slight gap between his two front teeth.

Pike bookmarked everything and shut the computer down for a while and thought it through. All these bits and pieces, it seemed silly that that could work . . . But maybe, yeah, you lump them all together--the songs in your head . . . the game . . . the picture of the stadium that's not there anymore . . . the dude hitting the walk-off . . . even the weather that day. Maybe you have a shot.

In fact . . . why not put on the damn podcast while you were at it? You had the dj's cracking jokes and announcing the songs and the news people chiming in every 20 minutes, starting every newscast with the time and date.

What could that hurt? The worst thing is you might end up in Sacramento instead of Chico, though of course worse than that would be ending up there and also *way off*, which meant either before or after the Milburns actually lived in Chico. But Pike was learning that in this business--at least up to a point--you took your chances.

Then there was the basement issue again, whether he might actually get lucky and be able to travel from The Box.

He went downstairs with a flashlight, and it didn't take much to see that the foundation walls, coming up out of the very bottom point down there, looked kind of old. There was cement all over the place of course, but there were noticeable big stones, rocks, tied together in sections by some kind of mortar, and you could see transition points where it looked like fresher walls had taken over and filled out the rest of the basement up to where the wood began.

It was all so silly but, as Frankie had said, and Mitch as well, why rock the boat? Though it was awfully appealing to use The Box, where not only did you feel safe and sound, but you didn't have to go anywhere or dodge anyone, such as a custodian in a school closet.

If it really turned out the house was built directly on the foundation of an older one, that pre-dated 1956, did that count?

Pike was tempted to call Mitch. Not to ask him *that* question so much, but whether you could get *screwed up* somehow.

In other words, if you tried to travel from a non-qualifying starting place, would you just fail and that was *it*, no big deal? . . . Or could something *bad* happen because you violated some rule?

The problem was Mitch wouldn't have a definite answer, but he'd tell him he'd raised an interesting and important point that needed to be addressed. And then he'd launch into telling you his latest findings in the southwest.

Pike made a decision that he was going to roll with it, do his dealings from The Box, as long as he could confirm that there was pre-1956 prior-house history, and that would require a trip to that assessor's office Frankie was talking about, in the morning. You could check a lot of that online, it looked like, but he felt better about seeing some actual paperwork.

There wasn't much to do the rest of the night except kill time. He tried to read a Harlen Coben mystery novel that he got for Christmas last year and had never opened, but that didn't last long.

An inspirational movie sounded better, something that would take his mind off what might, or might not, happen tomorrow.

He settled on *Hoosiers*, which he had seen before but not for a few years. He remembered Coach telling a story one time about *Hoosiers*. It was about 10 years ago and Hamilton was traveling to a non-league game against a tough school from Vacaville, up in the Bay Area. The bus trip was about three hours, and Coach maneuvered a special bus that had video screens in place, and he had the team watch *Hoosiers* on the way to the game. Thinking it would fire everyone up.

What happened, it backfired. The players got off the bus all drained because they got too worked up watching the movie and had nothing left for the actual game. Coach said Hamilton got crushed that night 42-3.

Anyhow, Pike liked the flow and the spirit of the movie. His favorite part actually, was the opening, where Gene Hackman, the new coach, is driving a long distance to the little town and finally ends up at the school. He's using maps and coffee to get there, and the music is playing, and the scenery as he gets off the major highways and onto the backroads is nice and simple and really puts you there.

The basketball part looked a little hokey, with the old-fashioned set-shots and the players moving kind of stiff. But the emotion is great, and there were a couple of moments where Pike broke down and cried a little, and he wouldn't be ashamed to admit that it felt good to let it out.

Chapter 19

The town of Beacon assessor's office opened at 9:30 and Pike was there waiting. The clerk was a young guy chewing gum who looked like he didn't want to be there, and it took a little while to figure out what Pike was looking for and dig out the appropriate file.

Pike sat in a cubicle and went through it. It was interesting, it was one manila file folder, and it held everything on official the history of the property, which wasn't a whole lot.

But there it was, son-of-a-gun, an original house was constructed in 1946 by a builder named A.R. Ernst, and then in 1974 a renovation was filed for by another builder, and when that was complete the property got reassessed. It was surprising they called it a renovation when it seemed like they tore whole joint down and started all over, except for the foundation, but whatever.

The main thing, the file confirmed there was pre-1956 activity there, and at this point that was good enough for Pike to let it fly now, and let the chips fall where they may.

He went home, showered and shaved and picked out the right clothes, which took a little thought, because he didn't want to show up 25 years ago wearing stuff that didn't exist back then, such as his Nikes or Green Bay Packers hat that was a modern alternate version of the one from back then.

The last thing was dipping into that wooden box again in his dad's sock drawer, that his dad didn't seem to pay attention to, and snagging two hundred fifty bucks.

Despite being mad at his dad for the Mrs. Milburn affair--and likely others too--Pike suspected, he did feel guilty stealing the money, and he vowed to pay it back when he could.

So there you were. He looked around his room, checked some notes he'd taken, grabbed his laptop and closed the door.

It was Thursday December 8th, ten past 11 in the morning now. It was chilly in the house, but nice and warm in The Box. Partly that was because of the furnace being nearby, but it was also the tightness, the coziness of the place.

He put on the Sacramento radio station, KEWC, from June 21st, 1993. He opened a tab for the newspaper baseball game summary that day, that showed the smiling player with the gap-teeth, and one for a photo of the old stadium. One of the dj's talked over the beginning of

the new Rod Stewart song, *Have I Told You Lately?* the way they did, and then the dj was quiet and he let the song play.

Pike closed his eyes at that point and hummed along. The song ended, and there was nothing, no change, and he was thinking should he open his eyes and start all over, try it again maybe with a different dj, a different song--when Hannamaker's snare drum started rattling very slightly.

Then it got louder, the metal snare belt on the underside of the drum starting to shake. It was different than it had been the previous times, starting off in the school closet, where Pike had felt *himself* begin to shake.

That wasn't happening here, but something was, and after a minute Pike felt himself holding on like he was in the front car of the old Big-Dipper rollercoaster on the beach at Santa Cruz, and the thing was slowly climbing to the top, getting ready to unleash that first monster drop, except someone had removed that bar that holds you in and now the the thing was falling big-time over the top like it was Niagra Falls.

There was blackness, he couldn't see a thing, suddenly. Which was also something new, a nasty twist from the way it had worked his previous times.

Then . . . he heard some birds . . . and the hum of distant traffic . . . and then the smell of farm grasses in warm weather . . . and it seemed like a good idea to open his eyes.

He was sitting against a beat-up wooden fence on the side of a road. The sign up ahead said Highway 32. Pike tried to absorb the situation, got up, and quickly realized wherever he was, he better be paying attention. Cars and trucks were whizzing by pretty quick, and he was basically on the shoulder of a 50-mile-an-hour road, not that far from the traffic.

He could make out a cluster of old red-brick buildings maybe a half-mile away, which had the look of the center of a town, or even the *whole* town, and he started jogging at a not quite attention-getting pace, but at an urgent one.

There was a small, permanent type billboard on the way into town that said **Welcome to Orland, Home of the Trojans**. Everything was in blue and white, which Pike assumed were the town or school colors.

This was someplace he'd never heard of unfortunately. It occurred to him he wasn't even sure he was in California, but then he checked three license plates in a row and confirmed he was.

The license plates were a little different too, than the current ones, not much but they were a little off. The main thing jumping out though was the cars. Quite a few weird looking

mini-vans for one, and different makes, and the American cars you saw were way bigger than now. The Japanese ones also seemed bigger, and were real squared-off. The pickups were also more squared-off, but they were the least different. Pike figured pick-up drivers never worried as much as they others about gas mileage, so the auto companies probably didn't have to change as much.

He was getting sidetracked though. The main good thing so far, he'd at least gone back. How far back, and where this was, exactly, were the issues.

You knew you were in a farm town because when you came to the first stoplight and sidewalk, right up front there was a tractor dealership. Pike crossed at the light and right there in front of *Dottie's Cafe* which looked light it might be the town hub were three newspaper boxes.

In the current world you didn't find one of these very often, much less three together. This part was going to be easy . . . no need to pick someone on the street this time and ask the incredibly awkward question of *what year is it?*

They had a *Sacramento Bee*, an *Orland Record* and a *Chico Enterprise-Record*.

Wait a second, *Chico* . . . and now for the date . . . June 22nd, 1993.

Un . . . freaking . . . real.

He popped into *Dottie's Cafe*--he was starving anyway--and this was a basic question you could ask now, which he did of the first person he saw, an old wrinkled guy in a gray workshirt who looked like he'd done outdoor work for about 75 years and still could.

The guy was friendly, told him door-to-door it was 19 miles to Chico, and got a good laugh out of it. Pike thanked him and was almost going to ask if he was going that way, but that could wait just a bit.

Meanwhile a cheeseburger was \$1.35 so he ordered two and they were tremendous, the meat tasting dang fresh and the trimmings piled high. The place was probably cheap anyway, if it was still around in 2016, but either way this was the kind of rollback he appreciated.

He was full now and took a little inventory around the cafe. The first thing, about half of them were smoking, and there was a steady rumble of talking in the joint. Nicotine did that, Pike was pretty sure, it could stimulate you and make you social.

The second thing, almost no one was on a phone, and the few that were kept it short and sweet. They made their call, they received or dished out their information, and that was it . . . And those few phones that you did see, they looked funny too. Big, and with an antennae you had to pull up before you got started.

Some of his teachers would talk about the *good old days* and Pike never paid much attention, but one concept he sort of had down was there wasn't much internet before the mid-90's, period, and what there was, your phone didn't connect to it.

So he had to admit, it was *different*, but not the worst thing, to be in a restaurant and nobody's fingering any device.

Pike stepped back outside. It was one-twenty, and he left Beacon a little past eleven, so it appeared the time-of-day travel part was still in synch. Now to get his rear end to Chico, and hopefully not have to stay there for months to work things out.

There was a guy fiddling around outside his truck, a slightly scary-looking dude in camouflage gear, in fact the kind of guy who might be all tatted up these days, but Pike suspected tattoos weren't popular and maybe not perfected back then.

The reason Pike approached the guy though, he liked his vehicle. It was raised, huge knobby tires and there were two legitimate-looking seats in the bed, open-air, with seat belts. You didn't see a setup like that, much, or at all, back home, maybe they weren't legal anymore. Pike figured what the heck and asked him if was going anywhere near Chico.

The guy had kind of a southern twang, like he wasn't from around here. He said he wasn't planning on it, but if Pike needed a ride he'd give him one. Just like that, not overly friendly, but matter-of fact.

Pike said that would be great and sat up front with the guy, not in the bed-seats after all, and the guy loosened up and gave him his story, that he was from Galveston, way down there on the Gulf of Mexico, and he was a lineman, which he explained to Pike was one of those guys who strung and repaired the high voltage stuff you saw on the towers going across hundreds of miles of wide-open countryside.

The guy, Toby, said there wasn't enough steady work down in Texas right now, and it was wacky the way it worked, but PGE up here hired him on a 4-month contract job. He was holeing up in a motel in Orland and today they weren't working, so driving people around was fine.

Toby was the kind of guy that didn't ask one word about Pike and probably still wouldn't even if they were riding cross-country together, but he did him a favor and when they got near the Chico college campus, which Pike figured was as good as any place, he thanked the guy and got out.

Downtown Chico was pretty laid back. Pike assumed there'd be a more lively vibe during the school year, and this was summer vacation and slower. It seemed like it wasn't a

bad place to live though, and taking it a step further, the Milburns, *what was so bad about it that they had to move out of here?*

You could walk to most everything and you had a couple of major streets, it seemed, that teed off into each other and put you right at the foot of the college. Nice and organized.

Pike knew going in that if he managed to make it here--which he was still kind of in shock about but didn't want to dwell on it--he would have to bite the bullet and get a motel. This wasn't going to be an up-and-back-on-same-day job, where you return to Beacon and you've wasted all of one hour.

He figured put a little distance on downtown and the campus and then start looking around, lodging was bound to be a little cheaper. A mile or so south, down past 14th Street, there was an ordinary looking motel, that called itself a *motor inn*, that could do the job. The sign said \$29 weekdays and Pike went inside and explained his circumstances--not his *real* circumstances but that he was a student on a budget and what could they do.

The guy in the office was Indian, and it was clear he was the owner and you could smell curry coming out of a back room and the guy was nice about it and gave him a room for \$75 for the week. Pike prayed that was all it would take.

The motel had an old-fashioned pool in the front of the parking lot, and it sure looked like it would hit the spot. Pike wanted bad to go in and and unwind but of course he didn't have swim trunks, so he said what the heck and asked the hotel guy, and without making a big deal about it the guy found him a pair and they fit okay.

The water felt great, they didn't heat the pool, you didn't need to, and Pike floated on his back for a while and looked at the bright blue sky and thought to himself, *this has been some day, you know it?*

Back in the room there was a phone book, the same as Frankie the librarian was trying to help him with that day when she was laying down doing her best in the lower racks. Here now under M-I were the Milburns. Rose and Preston. He expected it, he shouldn't have been surprised seeing the names there . . . but he couldn't help it . . . *this did not seem real.*

Pike had been working for a few days on what to say to break the ice if this moment really occurred, and he had about five ideas, and in the end none of them made sense, and sitting on the bed right here at this moment, staring at the motel phone, he had no plan at all.

So he dialed the number . . . Mrs. Milburn answered, he was pretty sure, because . . . *Dang It* . . . she sounded a lot like Audrey.

“Hi my name’s Pike,” he said, no need to disguise that part. “I’m here from out of town, but I think I *know* you . . . did you go to Hamilton in Beacon?”

“Why *yes*,” she said, “my husband and myself both . . . *Pike* doesn’t ring a bell . . . What year were you, if I might ask, and what was your last name?”

“Uh, just last year actually, ‘92,” Pike said. “Jensen . . . What was your husband’s name again?”

“Preston . . . and of course Milburn. My name’s Rose Richardson. Or it was then . . . Where do you live Pike?”

“Man, you got married kinda quick then,” he said. He couldn’t think on-the-spot of a place to fake where he lived, so he gave her his current block, hoping that wouldn’t be a problem.

She said, “I know it’s hard to believe, but we’ve been together since 8th grade . . . For the most part. We were married last fall.”

“It working out okay then?” he said, trying to make small talk, no idea where he was going.

Mrs. Milburn handled it in stride, she had a maturity about her, even at--what was it--20, 21? She said, “It’s going spectacularly well, if you must know . . . The little bumps in the road, the few there are, they become insignificant when you’re lucky enough that your mate is also your best friend.”

“I don’t like your husband,” Pike said.

He blurted it out, on the fly, wanting, *needing*, to stir something up, make something *happen*. Since this love-fest they were apparently enjoying was starting to piss him off.

Which was another thing. Maybe not important right now, but out of curiosity . . . how’d they go from lovey dovey, to her messing around with half the town?

“Pardon?” Rose said.

“Yep,” Pike said, “I’m of a mind to kick his ass. If he’s the one that pulled it.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, “what in heavens are you talking about? Pulled *what*?”

“Okay, that’s on me then,” Pike said. “I shouldn’t have said anything, if you don’t know.”

“This is . . . I’m not sure what to say,” she said.

“Where is he right now, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Why at work, of course.”

“The trucking place?”

There was a pause. When she spoke again she was cautious. “Yes, that’s correct. How did you know where my husband works?”

“Your sister told me. At least she said she was your sister.”

This was starting to shape up a little bit. Maybe *that* was the way to work it . . . *spook ‘em the fuck out of the state.*

“I beg your pardon,” she said, “but I don’t have a sister.”

Pike remembered this. It was something Audrey volunteered on that drive home from Manhattan Beach, that her mom was an only child. No aunts or uncles or cousins from Audrey and Hailey on that side of the family.

“You sure about that?” Pike said. “Nice person, very pretty . . . She said her name was Audrey.”

He thought he heard Rose let out a little gasp at the other end of the phone line.

“Why, what an . . . uncanny . . . coincidence, then,” she said. “That’s my grandmother’s name.”

“I don’t know anything about *that*,” Pike said. “She just said, if you have kids, that’s what you’re going to name your first girl. Audrey . . . after your sister.”

“My Lord,” she said, after a moment.

“Can you make me dinner? Do you have extra?” Pike said.

“*I’m* sorry,” she said. “Your questions--such as they are--are wandering toward the inappropriate.”

“I mean with your husband *included* . . . What’s that guy’s name again?”

“Well Preston, but that’s not the point.”

“The point,” Pike said, “is I’m not trying to put the moves on you or anything.”

Remembering Hannamker’s line and throwing it in for the heck of it. “Even though you *are* a hot little number.”

“Okay. Thank you for calling then . . . Mr. Jensen,” she said, going formal on him now. “This has been . . . unusual . . . to say the least.”

“Ah, c’mon,” Pike said. “I’ll bring dessert . . . Putting the cards on the table here, it would *behoove* you to listen to what I have to say.” Not sure if he got that word right, but hopefully she’d get the message.

“You’re so insistent,” she said, “this is very peculiar.”

“You think . . . it’s on account of you being with Preston from such an early age?”

“Excuse me. *What’s* on account of that?”

“That you’re going to *cheat* on him right and left . . . What *else* did you think I was talking about?”

She was clearly ready to slam down the phone more than once, but couldn’t pull the trigger. “Unh-huh. And I suppose, my . . . sister . . . informed you of this as well.”

“You’ll disguise it well of course,” Pike continued. “Saturday nights sometimes, you might have a deal going with the old girl friends, a little innocent card game maybe, you all sit around with the red wine having fun complaining about your husbands, getting it off your chest . . . Except the only problem, you leave your house looking *way* too good to be headed to a middle-aged-gals get-together.”

Pike was admittedly feeling pretty savage, laying it out there like this, but what else could you do.

“Wow-eee,” Rose said, but she still didn’t hang up.

“Answer your question,” Pike said, “yeah, your sister informed me of that too . . . Your *other* sister. Hailey.” Letting that one ride.

There was a pause. “Okay now you’re starting to freak me out,” she said. “Maybe it’s *not* the worst idea for us to meet you . . . briefly . . . and I’m certain we can put all our concerns to rest.”

“Sounds good. What are *your* concerns?”

“I’m . . . not entirely sure . . . It’s only that, some of your references have been . . . disturbing.”

Pike asked her again if tonight worked, and she said fine, for him to please come at 6:30. When they hung up he thought it was kind of strange that she didn’t at least check with her husband first.

Luckily Mrs. Milburn was a darn good cook. It was also fortunate that the Milburns, at least tonight anyway, were old-school meat consumers.

“Honestly,” Pike said, after he’d polished off thirds on the pot roast, “that’s the best meal I’ve had in weeks.”

“Oh, I believe you’re buttering me up,” Rose said. “I’m sure your mom is an excellent cook.”

Dang, she not only *talked* like Audrey, she looked a lot like her too, and she definitely had her body language. She was a classy girl, graceful. They *both* were.

Mr. Milburn was sitting there at the table looking slightly like the odd man out. That was the way he was as an old guy too. Pike admired him actually, that he didn't need to inject himself, comfortable with letting Rose be herself.

But enough of this bull-roar.

"How much longer you going be at your job, do you reckon?" Pike asked Preston.

"That's hard to say. I'm hoping they promote me up that ladder. I feel like I'm in line."

"Oh yeah?" Pike said. "When they pick up and move to Iowa, what are you going to do then?"

They were in the middle of dessert, a peach pie that Pike had brought, which luckily in 1993 pricing only ran him \$2.29 at one of the local bakeries on Main Street.

Mr. Milburn finished swallowing and put down his fork. "And what gives you the notion my company would move to *Iowa*?" he said.

"Ask them then . . . Look 'em in the eye, see how they react . . . They're going to spring it on you soon enough."

Mr. Milburn's eyes were wide, like Pike was an idiot, but you could see at the same time he was working this off-the-wall piece of news around, that part of it might be making sense.

"Rose," Mr. Milburn said, with a little authority for the first time, "I'm not sure I understand why we're entertaining this *Pike* tonight." He turned to Pike. "With all due respect," he said.

"Honey," she said, "I would agree with you . . . Except I didn't know what to make of a few things he said, and it seemed wise to clear the air."

"What *other* things?" Preston said.

"Knowing that my grandmother's name is Audrey, for one," she said.

"I *didn't* know that," Pike said. "What I said, was that's what you're going to name your first daughter."

"Okay fine, sort of the same thing . . . Then he brings up Hailey."

"What *about* her?" Mr. Milburn said, straightening up slightly.

Pike kept his mouth shut, and Rose said, "He claims to have spoken to my sister, named Hailey."

Mr. Milburn pushed away from the table and excused himself, and you could hear the back door close.

“He goes out there and smokes,” Rose said, “because it bothers me in the house . . . He’s a good guy, like I told you . . . He had a little sister, born prematurely, she passed away when she was two.”

No need for anyone to mention that her name would have been Hailey.

“I’m going to go,” Pike said. “Thanks.”

She said, “I didn’t bring up the part where you accused him of being the one who *pulled* something.”

“Ah.”

“Should I?”

“Sure. Why not? He’ll know what he pulled.”

She fumbled around for a minute. “This is a stupid question . . . what are you *doing* here anyway, Pike?”

“I’m looking for a job. Do you know any?”

She told him she’d keep her eye open and asked him where he was staying, and he gave her the name of the motel and she wrote it down, and he left. He had no car obviously, but he hadn’t minded walking here, it let him think, and on the way back he tried to sort out if he’d screwed anything up big-time, or if he was actually making any progress.

On the way back to the motel, on Broadway, which seemed to be a second Main Street, running parallel to it one block over, there was a bar that looked like it had a little life to it.

Pike was thirsty, he could go for a beer, or he could just as easily enjoy a soda, but either way, why not try to get in? Then it hit him that his fake ID, which had him born in 1995 so that he’d be 21 in 2016, wouldn’t exactly do the trick.

There was a group of people heading inside, a motley herd of about 10 of them, all looking over-age, and two large bouncers at the door were treating it casual, and Pike pulled up his collar and ducked his head slightly and stuck close to the shoulder of one of the herd and was in.

He ordered a light beer, and he shouldn’t have, but he gravitated toward the pool table. It had been a while now since the incident in Utah, downtown Logan, where he and that other recruit whose name he couldn’t remember got into it with those local yokels.

All he wanted to do here was sit and watch, unwind a little. Not challenge anyone to play, not make eyes at anyone’s girlfriend, zip.

Unfortunately bars were unpredictable places, and this had the feel of one of those no-nonsense hard-core joints like the Utah one. The atmosphere was probably different in here when the college was in session, more tame, more laid-back, but right now with school out and not many students around there was a definite edge to the place.

It didn't take long. "Yo, pretty boy, I'm *talking* to you," someone said, though the guy *hadn't* been talking to him before. "I said--you got *next*, or what?"

Pike had had a full day, and he wasn't fond of some jackass getting in his face, so he ignored the guy, which turned out to be a mistake.

Next thing, the guy has a handful of Pike's shirt and he's lifting him up out of his seat, and Pike can smell his acidic bad breath and he can see the flakes of old food in the guy's beard.

The guy brought him to eye level and began the usual tough-guy lecture about *When I talk to you, pardner, you'd best show me some respect*, and so on.

Pike wasn't in the mood for a showdown, and didn't particularly care for being singled out like this, so without thinking too hard he popped his head forward into the guy's face, and the guy went down and that was that.

And in a perfect world he could sit back down and relax and go back to nursing his beer.

Except things were never that simple. No sooner had the idiot hit the floor than Pike felt himself swallowed up from behind by two big, hairy arms.

Again, he reacted without thinking and popped his head *backwards* this time, and *that* guy went down, no problem. Pike recognized him as one of oversized bouncers that he'd snuck past on the way in.

That would mean unfortunately there'd be a *third* guy, the other bouncer, and before Pike could find him that guy reared back and swung a forearm that resembled a club and caught him in the side of the face.

Pike turned toward the guy, who didn't seem all that angry, more like surprised that Pike was still standing.

Pike felt bad for the guy for a second, since after all, he was only doing his job, which was controlling the unruly patrons.

But he couldn't help thinking of the old *Butch Cassidy* movie, that was one of his dad's favorites, where Butch is about to get stabbed to death by some lunatic but says *hold on, we have to get the rules straight first*.

The bad guy is dumbfounded for a moment and hesitates, and Butch delivers.

So Pike let the brute come one step closer and, that scene in his mind, he delivered a monster foot to the groin.

The poor dude was going to be in trouble for a while, as Pike was pretty darn sure he'd done some rupturing, and/or popping, at the minimum.

He took one quick final sip of his beer, so not to look frazzled, and then, not running but not dogging it either, got the hell out of there.

When he got outside and turned the corner out of view of the bar, then he did pick up the pace and run--fast. He got within a block of the motel, looked around, gave it a 360 degree scope, felt like the coast was clear and hightailed it to the motel and ducked inside his room and closed and chained the door, and after a minute realized the dang curtains were still open so he zipped those up too.

This was just great. *Nice going.*

Again, in a perfect world--or maybe if you were in a place like New York City where bar fights probably happened every night and you could get lost in the crowd--you'd be okay.

But here, he seriously doubted it. He'd just messed up three guys, who for all he knew were respected citizens of this hick town.

That could be an exaggeration, but who knows? Cops have been known to moonlight as bouncers, haven't they?, so that angle might be in play now as well. It wasn't *probable*, from the looks of the two of them, but the point was anything is *possible*, and at the very least, three angry people and likely a few of their friends would be looking for a distinctive under-aged kid who definitely wasn't *from here*.

Fortunately, in 1993 you again didn't have that much of the internet operating yet and Facebook wouldn't be invented for another ten years, and no one could have been taking photos or videos of the incident with their phones.

But sooner or later there was a good chance the event would at least make it into the old fashioned newspaper, and that couldn't be good.

Pike could picture it: **Mystery Man Hospitalizes Three in Downtown Bar Altercation.** And then a couple sentences down would be a description of him, and the Milburns would read it and think about it for half a second before calling it in, and like an idiot he told them exactly where he was staying and they wrote it down.

And what about the motel guy?

Pike figured he could try moving to a different one, maybe that was an idea, but no, that's dumb, then you'd have a different motel guy putting the same 2 and 2 together.

Right now he was too exhausted to think. The day that started so long ago with the trip to the Beacon assessor's office was hitting him like a ton of bricks, and he barely made it under the covers before he was out cold.

There was a coffee maker in the room and Pike needed it bad in the morning. He turned on the TV--he'd forgotten about *that*--but after sitting through a couple of torturously boring local newscasts he was relieved that his display last night apparently hadn't made the cut.

It seemed safe enough to check out the continental breakfast in the office, and while he was wolfing down multiple items he grabbed a morning Chico newspaper that was laying around, and there was nothing in there either.

Maybe there never would be . . . but maybe all it meant was there wasn't anything *yet*.

When Pike decided he was full enough he dragged himself back to the room and tried to plot strategy. *Such as it was*.

His options were extremely limited. This might be funny actually, if it wasn't so pathetic . . . All the build-up to get here and the big plans to change history, at least for one family, and then *Boom* -- you pinned yourself in a silly motel room basically in the middle of nowhere.

And morning TV, especially, it seemed, in 1993, was more than terrible. Luckily at 11 a pro bull riding competition from Amarillo came on ESPN, which provided a tiny measure of entertainment while Pike continued to rack his brain what the heck to do from here.

It was mid-afternoon, just after three, when out of the blue the room phone sounded with a shrill jolt.

Pike was afraid to speak, in case it somehow really might be the authorities, but it would have driven him crazy if he didn't answer, so he did, but he kept his mouth shut.

"Are you *there*?" the voice said twice, and by the second time it was pretty clearly Mrs. Milburn.

"Gee," Pike said. "How'd you find me?" Since he hadn't signed anything when he checked in or given the guy his name, he'd only forked over the 75 bucks.

"I described you," she said. "The nice gentleman connected me."

“Well what’s up?” he said, happy to hear from her, if nothing else, to break the monotony.

“How was your evening last night . . . and your morning?”

She asked it like she didn’t care, she was building *up* to something, it felt like.

“I got in a little trouble last night,” he said. “If you hear anything, you need to believe me that it wasn’t my fault.” Pike thinking *what the hay*, a preemptive strike can’t hurt.

What Rose said was, “Listen . . . I should talk to you.”

What could *this* be now? Pike thought it would be more than a little awkward to have her come by the motel, but it would also be *safe*-awkward compared to other options, so he invited her over.

Twenty minutes later she tapped on the door.

“You don’t fool around,” he said, sitting her at the little round table that motels tend to have.

“I’ve been such a fool, haven’t I?” she said.

“Hunh?”

“You were right . . . you were so right, obviously . . . What on earth was I thinking?”

Uh-oh. “I’m not following . . . What are you *talking* about?”

“*Preston*. Who did you *think*? . . . Just what you put your finger on . . . I’m simply not ready.”

Pike was scrambling in his head trying to remember exactly what he’d said, that might be setting her off now.

“Hold on there,” he said. “Let’s don’t be ridiculous . . . What you may be going through, I guarantee it’s normal, in any marriage.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it . . . In my *next* marriage, if there is one . . . I’m going to leave Preston. It may be early enough to get an annulment, but that’s not a deal-breaker. We’re done.”

Ho-ly *Shit*.

“What?” she said. “Why are you looking at me like that? And you’re kinda cute . . . *whoever you are* . . . Did I tell you that?”

Oh . . . My . . . God.

So she was already acting-out like a free woman . . . Or of course, like someone who is destined to cheat on her husband, except with things accelerating just a bit.

But forget all that for the moment. The alarming part now, which Pike had idiotically not considered when he was taking digs at her on the phone, getting under skin: If this continued, there wouldn't be any Audrey and Hailey to try to save their mom *for*.

He felt himself sliding back into the same no-nonsense mode that got the better of him last night in the bar.

"Well you may *think* you're done," he said quietly. "But the fact is, you're just getting started."

"Yeah, right," she said, but he had her attention, she seemed a tad less sure of herself.

"You *know* you and Mr . . . Preston . . . are going to have two children," he continued, "beautiful girls. Two years apart . . . The sweetest people . . . And I believe you know what their names are, as well."

"That was . . . a bit ominous," she said. "And also odd that you started to address him as Mr. Milburn . . . I'm not kidding around now Pike. What's your *story*?"

"Don't worry about that . . . Just remember, *the girls* . . . it's all about the girls . . . *They need you.*"

"And . . . if I told you you are full of horse manure?" Very tentatively spoken though, like she'd lost a lot of momentum.

Pike stood up for effect. He began pacing around the little room and returned to where she was sitting and hovered over her.

"The big thing," he said, "the single most important thing. You and Preston, you can't set foot in Beacon again. If you do, something bad will happen." Pike nodded at her.

They both let it hang for a minute.

"Why, is that . . . some sort of threat?" she said, but her voice was small, and there was fear in it.

Pike said, "You may even decide, *okay, fine I won't* . . . But the problem is, you'll be drawn there anyway . . . Your car may break down 200 miles away, and the tow truck driver, irrational as it is, may say he has to tow you to Beacon . . . You have to fight that with all your power. And you have the ability to, it's in your hands Rose."

Pike felt his voice cracking as he finished it off. He believed every word.

She put her hands to her face and began to sob, and Pike had to say, she sure reminded him of Audrey upset, and he was very tempted to hold her and tell everything was going to be okay. But he didn't.

After a while she went in the bathroom and washed her face, and when she came out she didn't say a word and headed straight to the door and opened it and walked out into the bright afternoon.

She looked back once, as she was getting in her car, and Pike said, "Have a great life."

Pike had noticed a pizza place about a block down, and figured the odds were he'd be fine going there, but he played it safe and had one delivered.

He was going major stir-crazy in the room. This would have to be his last night here. He was afraid to *go* anywhere, and no way he could take a repeat performance of today.

He prayed he'd done enough to influence events. He feared he hadn't though, and that was 100 percent on him.

A Giants baseball game came on, against the Philadelphia Phillies, which was pretty weird since it was from Candlestick Park, which they had abandoned years ago in real time. His dad told him stories about the place, how windy and cold it got, and Pike could see on TV everyone bundled up tonight like they were in the Arctic Circle, while it was it was currently in the 80's in Chico.

Speaking of baseball, Pike noticed one interesting thing when he was cruising the newspaper at breakfast this morning. The minor league team, the Chico Buttes, which he used the stadium photo from to help him get here (he still wasn't a big believer in that kind of gimmick but he couldn't argue, because something did *work*)--anyhow, he learned the Chico Buttes practice in Orland.

Not a big deal, but that might explain how Orland came into the equation and why he landed there instead of directly in Chico. Who knows.

The Giants game went to extra innings, and Pike started dozing off, and he was comfortably in the state right before you launch into a deep sleep . . . when there was a pounding on the door.

This was no tapping, like with Rose this afternoon, this packed some urgency. Not good.

Pike tip-toed to the corner of the window and eased back the curtain just a touch, and you couldn't see great because of the angle of the outside lighting right in his face, but it sure looked like Mr. Milburn.

Pike carefully opened the door, and Mr. Milburn offered his hand, and Pike shook it and he came in.

"I'd like thank you," Preston said. "Of course, what that would be *for*, I don't *know*."

This could get ugly. Pike was acutely regretting answering the door.

"First thing," Pike said, trying to lighten the mood, "I'd offer you some pizza, but I ate it all. How about some coffee though?"

Mr. Milburn wasn't interested. "You have a lot of nerve," he said. "You waltz into town, you start running some game on us . . . We're decent people. Who in the hell gives you that right, boy?"

Wow, the *boy* part tacked on. This was a way different side of Milburn than he'd seen, even when he was drunk and crazy that time on their anniversary and Pike and Hannamaker had to restrain him.

And he continued. "You say you were Class of '92, is that correct?" Not waiting for an answer. "Two years behind us . . . So I checked with some folks. No one's ever heard of you. But you figured we'd find that out sooner or later, didn't you . . . And it doesn't bother you."

Pike tried to put his hand on Preston's shoulder, but he slapped it away. "My wife, I've never seen her so hysterical, so twisted . . . And now she's accusing me of *pulling something* . . . Do you know she could *leave* me? . . . And you'd have blood on your hands, boy."

Pike said, "She's *not* going to leave you. *That cannot happen* . . . And you can't *let* it." Praying he had that right.

Mr. Milburn cleared this throat and then reached into his right front pants pocket, as casually as he might have been grabbing his wallet, and pulled out a small revolver and pointed it at Pike.

Pike was stunned but managed to spread his hands and put them up.

Preston said, "Long as you convince me you'll be leaving town, in *juusst* a minute here, nice and peaceful--never, *ever* to be to interfering in our business again--then we're good."

"Yeah, I'm planning to leave pretty soon," Pike said, keeping a good eye on Mr. Milburn's pistol, which was moving around a bit.

"So you mind spitting out what your *deal* is, pal? . . . 'Cause no matter how I work it around, it doesn't quite add up."

Pike was nervous, and it was hard to think, but he tried to get it right. He said, "Well . . . do believe in UFO's? Or what about God, do you believe in *Him*? . . . Or angels? . . . Forces of nature? . . . Or how about *freaks* of nature? You open-minded to any of *that* stuff?"

Pike wasn't sure how *he* felt about most of it, and he didn't like getting heavy with people, but it seemed necessary now.

“I have my beliefs, but they’re private,” Preston said.

“You wouldn’t think,” Pike said, “in a dumpy motel room like this, you’d find a picture on the wall that summed it up, but you have to admit . . .” He pointed toward the wall where the TV was, to the right of Mr. Milburn, and when Mr. Milburn turned toward it for just an instant, Pike’s hand shot out and he grabbed Preston’s wrist that was holding the gun, and pinned it against his leg.

He carefully pried the pistol away. Mr. Milburn didn’t fight him very hard. He seemed defeated, and to be accepting it. It was as though he’d been putting on an act that he wasn’t comfortable with.

Pike knew a little bit about firearms, not from his dad, who was scared to death of them and didn’t believe ordinary citizens should have access to them, but from his Uncle Pete, who had a small ranch up near Nevada City. Pike spent a summer up there when he was 14, and Uncle Pete was patient with him and taught him a lot, including weapon safety.

Pike told Mr. Milburn to please sit down for a moment, and he laid the revolver on the bureau and carefully unloaded the six chambers.

Then he picked it back up and walked over to Preston, who just for an instant seemed to fear for his life before realizing that was irrational.

Pike said, “Those questions you were asking, they were good ones. Very fair. That would have been me too, if the tables were turned.”

Preston’s hands were shaking now.

“Relax . . . please,” Pike said. “What you’re concerned with, I’m sorry, I can’t give you a straight answer . . . But look-at here.”

And with that, he held out the butt of the gun in his right hand, and the barrel in his left, and then he squeezed in opposite directions, and the thing bent into a very ugly-looking U-shape.

Pike handed it back to Mr. Milburn. “Simplest thing,” Pike said, “take good care of her. And please stay away from the central valley . . . In fact moving out of state, that’d be by far your best bet . . . You *have* to trust me on that.”

Mr. Milburn absent-mindedly accepted the gun and stuck it back in his pants, and flew out of there fast enough where he might have set a record for departing motel rooms.

Pike stood still for a while, and took a little stock of what happened today.

Was it good enough?

It was going to have to be.

You couldn't google anything to confirm it of course, but his impression from the photo of the Chico Buttes' stadium was that it was pre-1956. Everything was wooden benches, no backs on the seats, and there was a funky-looking overhang that was supported by pretty-ancient-looking posts.

For a second he thought *oh no though*, there's probably another game tonight, but then he realized how late it was, and that there hopefully wouldn't be anyone still around.

The ballpark was down past the fairgrounds. Pike wasn't sure how far that was, but he knew which direction--you exited the motel and hung a left.

He could walk it, or jog it, like he had a few times lately, but that all sounded like too much work right now. So he called an old-fashioned taxi, and the guy showed up a few minutes later and didn't seem to pay any attention to who Pike may or may not be, and before long he'd paid the guy and was hunting around the stadium for a good spot. All the lights were off but the side door happened to be to open to the snack bar, and you could smell the hotdogs from earlier in the evening, and Pike closed it behind him and thought of Frankie the librarian wishing him Godspeed.

Chapter 20

He opened his eyes to the sounds of people running and, sticks hitting a ball, it sounded like, and then the running and sticks stopped and there was a lot of female laughing.

He looked around and saw that he had indeed landed right on the emblem at the 50-yard-line of the Hamilton football field, admittedly nice familiar turf, except he was in the middle of a girls P.E. class that was going on, and they were playing field hockey. Which had ground to a halt.

“Excuse me, *Mr. Gillette*, . . . what could you *possibly* be doing here?” It was Ms. Lord, the girls P.E. teacher, but luckily Pike had her for art one semester, so she knew him and was a good sport.

“It’s crazy,” he said. “I’m not *sure*.”

A bunch of the P.E. girls started laughing again, and Pike was relieved that he recognized a few of them, and he also took a glance at the scaffold where the letter **H** had been that he ripped down, and it was still down, so he was convinced things were current.

Just to be sure though, he posed the question to Ms. Lord, “Time and date please?”

She shook her head but informed him it was 1:07 on December 8th, and that this party was now officially over and he needed to get his ass back to class pronto. She didn’t use that word, but still.

Pike thanked her and walked back to the main building. Things had held up. He’d left at a little after 11, and given the one-hour-per-day business, his inbound effort had been right on the money. A grand total of two hours away from Beacon.

He didn’t have any books or notebooks with him, but it didn’t matter and he finished off the last two-and-a-half periods of the day without a problem.

One guy he wanted to find after school was Hannamaker, and he looked for his car in the parking lot but didn’t see it. Jack drove a 20-year-old blue Honda, but then a few minutes later Hannamker comes lumbering along and starts getting into a beat-up Ford Bronco.

Which, given the history of these things, wasn’t totally surprising now and was probably no big deal.

Pike called over to him. “Yo, what’s up man,” Jack said. “I may be in The Box later, not sure.” This was very good to hear, that whatever Pike may have done in Chico didn’t throw off The Box.

“Listen,” Pike said, “can I talk to you a second?”

“Help yourself. But I have to stop by my house real quick, and then head over to Alicia’s.”

Wait a second. *Alicia?* Who Pike had gone out with for about a weekend? *Dang.*

“How long has *that* been going on?” Pike said.

Jack gave him a funny look. “What are you talking about? I don’t know, six, seven months, whatever . . . You got a problem with it, all of a sudden?”

“No, not a problem . . . just . . . whatever happened to Cathy, is all.”

“Cathy Carlisle? Dude, what’s going *on* with you? She’s hooked up with Foxe . . . If I didn’t know you so well, I’d say you just dropped in from Mars, or some shit . . . But I gotta go.”

Unbelievable. Cathy and *Foxe*.

Pike said, “Can you . . . swing by Birch and Ortega? . . . Drop me off there?”

“That’s fine,” Jack said, “just get in.”

When Jack had driven away, Pike stayed there on the corner for a while, and then slowly, deliberately, began walking the half-block to Audrey’s house.

As he got close, his heart was racing and he tried to take deep breaths but those didn’t work. It was going to require some fortitude to ring the bell, but it had to be done.

He heard footsteps and then a pause, as though someone was looking through the peephole before they opened the door.

A girl’s voice, enthusiastic, said, “Oh hey Pike,” and he froze, and she opened the door. “What are you doing at my *house?*” she said.

It was someone he didn’t recognize.

He couldn’t answer for a minute, he just stared at her to make sure she wasn’t, in any way shape or form, Audrey. Or Hailey.

“I’m thinking,” he said, “that I got the wrong address.”

“Well who were you looking for then?” she said, with a touch of disappointment.

“The Milburns.”

She scrunched up her face. “I’m trying to place them,” she said. “I know most of the neighbors, and I’m sorry that doesn’t ring a bell.”

“What about . . . at Hamilton,” he said, “Audrey, or Hailey?” Figuring this girl had to go there if she knew him.

Also fearing her answer, it dawning on him like a ton of bricks that hey, maybe they *did* move back, but into a different *house*.

“No. Sorry . . . You want to come in, or something? You look cold.”

Pike thanked her and said he’d take a rain check.

Normally he wouldn’t be crazy about having to walk home from here, but tonight it was okay. Halfway there he realized he’d been so caught up in his project that he hadn’t checked his messages since last night.

There was one from Mitch, and another from Dani. Maybe not the greatest, that second one.

Then there were a *bunch* from someone named Jocelyn.

He’d deal with them all in due time, but not tonight. It was starting to get dark, and there were Christmas lights coming on here and there. It was his favorite time of year, and he was missing Audrey, but wherever she was, she was in a better place.

THE END

**Pike Gillette Returns in:
Time Games (Book 3)**

Mailing List:

RexBolt.com

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