

TIME LINE

by REX BOLT



**Pike Gillette
Time Travel
Book 4**

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Chapter 1

“It’s almost as if,” Hannamaker said, “in another time and place this wouldn’t be happening.”

Pike wasn’t sure what he meant exactly--and whether the guy even *knew* what he meant--but it was hard to argue with the bottom line.

Pike said, “You got *that* right,” and Andrea and Eva and Dave laughed.

It was the day after Christmas and they were in an 18-and-over club in Mesa, the warm-up band finished and the main act setting up, and Pike supposed you could be in worse circumstances.

Yesterday had been his first-ever Christmas away from his parents, and it started off slightly bittersweet but the timing seemed appropriate given his dad’s increasing infidelity issues--and who the heck knows what his mom may or may not have been doing to *counteract* those, not that you could blame her, but still.

Lucy cheerfully cooked up another storm, this time a variation on Eggs Benedict followed by homemade pastries with blueberry filling, and Gertrude dropped in, and there were some presents passed around, luckily only one coming Pike’s way, since he unfortunately didn’t get anyone a darn thing.

In fact it would have been downright embarrassing if Jack gave him something, since Pike was still ticked off at the guy and didn’t see why Dani needed to drive all that way backwards and rescue him at that fake old-western town where Pike ditched him.

But Jack and Andrea did exchange a couple gifts, as did Mitch and Lucy and Gertrude, and admittedly Mitch’s one to Pike wasn’t the most exciting--it was a used edition of ‘More Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain’--and frankly Pike needed this kind of overload on Christmas morning like a hole in the head, but you had to appreciate Mitch’s thought.

Dave and Eva were the high school kids from Pocatello, who happened to pick up Pike hitchhiking not once but twice on Interstate-15, in northern Utah near the Idaho line.

Pike of course had been trying to help Dani resolve the issue with Chuck--while he was still alive--meaning cut him off at the pass before he met Dani in the karaoke bar in Blackfoot, which would lead to his untimely demise a month later in the hot tub in Palm Springs.

So Pike gave it his best effort and traveled back there, both times coming up dangerously short of any particular town--and fortunately it happened to be Halloween and Dave and Eva were cutting half a day of school and heading to a mall in Salt Lake City, and they spotted him looking kind of dazed standing in the weeds on the east shoulder of the interstate.

It was clear to Pike that *getting* there in these trips was a bit iffy, in terms of pinpointing the location--he ended up in the water in Berkeley for example, in the middle of that swimming pool--and for whatever reason he had more success, accuracy-wise, *returning*, meaning typically to Beacon . . . but that wasn't the important thing.

The first time, Dave had a wrap-job on his arm, and he was cranky, Eva pointing out that he was one of the stars of the team, varsity basketball, and injured something in a meaningless pre-season scrimmage a couple days ago. So she did most of the talking and she was perky and fun, and Pike wondered if he stuck around for a while that maybe Dave would slide out of the picture.

But Pike bought them lunch as a token of appreciation and by the end Dave was a good guy and Pike felt guilty thinking like that.

Then of course Pike screwed it up the first go-round with Chuck, gave him the wrong time to meet the fake talent scout in Boise, and it didn't play out well . . . and on Christmas Eve, instead of settling in watching football and eating Lucy's turkey, Pike had to first drag himself back up to Idaho to re-do Chuck.

Not surprisingly Dave and Eva were barreling down the interstate again and spotted him, the other side of the freeway this time, a little more north

toward Pocatello, and Pike had had to walk a while first . . . but once again they picked him up.

And of course now Eva was the one with the arm wrap or cast, and *she* was the high school basketball player, not Dave, and she was in the bad mood.

The only weird part was they knew him, they remembered picking him up the first time . . . and Pike had to wrap his head around this one, and finally figured out that he was arriving a day later now, where last time he had to spend a night in a motel to kill time.

So yeah. They weren't exactly the same Dave and Eva, and their car was different too, so on the one hand you threw out the logic but on the other it made sense that they remembered him. Dave even asked if he'd found the karaoke place in Blackfoot last time, that he'd been asking about.

Pike had decided a few of these travel-trips ago that you'd better just go with the flow, that what you expect to be logical isn't necessarily, and that sometimes you're surprised the *other* way.

Meaning . . . quit trying to figure it out.

The second trip had worked better, he'd made a one-hour adjustment to Chuck's itinerary, and all was well that ends well on Christmas Eve back in Lucy's place in Anthem.

Pike had thrown it out there, when Dave and Eva were dropping him off (round 2) that he'd be in Arizona for Christmas and why not come down. It being Halloween in Pocatello, they had almost two months to mull it over, and Pike figured he'd never hear from them again in a million years, that it was simply a polite gesture on his part--but son of a gun, they took him up on it, and here they all were rendezvousing at a place called *Crouch 3-A*, which on the outside looked like a warehouse but was pretty crazily alive inside.

And dang . . . the women down here, and Pike could see Jack absorbing the field the same way--a little overdoing it in fact, where Pike started feeling sorry for Andrea.

But she seemed fine, and was hitting it off with Eva, and Dave was laid back, enjoying the scene, and someone would crack a joke that wasn't that funny, but they were in a good state and everyone would laugh out of proportion.

The new band had a banner and part of it was obscured but it said *Somebody* and The Destroyers, and Pike figured their repertoire would be grungy, hard rock similar to the opening band, and the musicians had wild hair and sleeveless t-shirts and major tattoos including running up their necks.

But their music was surprisingly light, and melodic and danceable.

It didn't take long for Jack and Andrea, and then Dave and Eva to get out there and bop around, which was in a squared off area with a slick floor below the stage . . . and just like that, Pike felt like the odd one out.

There were a few slow dances mixed in which amplified the situation . . . and man, they'd switched it around by the third slow one . . . Jack was dancing slow with Eva, and Pike had to admit pretty dang close, and Dave was doing the same with Andrea. No harm, no foul, apparently.

Pike went to the concession stand to get an iced tea, and there was a girl in line behind him. He figured what the hay . . . and asked her if *she* wanted to dance, and before she could answer, her boyfriend, standing there more or less right with her, gave Pike a look. And how could he have not noticed the guy?

Luckily that's all that happened, and Pike got his beverage--and a couple hot dogs now too, deciding, dang, the odd-man-out business makes you hungry, on top of frustrated.

He went back to the dance floor and stood on the sidelines until the festivities wrapped up, the band frontman announcing they were going to get down and dirty these last few songs . . . and those *were* a bit harder edged, but not much, though Jack and Andrea and Dave and Eva seemed thrilled with the whole thing and came out of there sweating like dogs.

On the sidewalk heading to the vehicles Jack said, "I hear they got an all-night Winter Carnival going on in Tempe. Near the college." Meaning the AZ State.

"What," Pike said, "you're an expert suddenly on Phoenix nightlife?"

“I’m just saying,” Jack said, “some dude mentioned it between songs. Whatever.”

“I heard him too,” Eva said.

“So did I,” Dave said. “And someone else added that they have ice skating.”

“You’re kidding,” Andrea said, which made sense to Pike, that reaction, the overnight low last night feeling about 80 degrees, and Mitch relentlessly blasting the air conditioning in the little apartment that he was putting Pike and Jack up in.

“She’s good,” Jack said, referring apparently to Andrea’s skating prowess--something Pike never knew about in the brief time *he* was dating her.

Then again, he never asked her. Andrea had showed up at Hamilton this year out of the blue, and Pike at first wondered if she was connected to the Milburns’ disappearance--as a bizarre substitute for Audrey--but he put that out of his head.

He did ask her where she lived previously and he couldn’t remember her answer, but he figured it must have been somewhere cold now that he was hearing this. Maybe someplace with frozen lakes.

“Well I’m down for that,” Eva said. And they *all* said they were, except Pike, who was pretty tired at this point and had had enough, but you went along with the herd.

They’d closed off a couple of downtown blocks for the carnival. It was a creative setup for down here in the southwest, you had to give them credit. They had a version of that weird sport called curling, there was a competition involving ice blocks, and they even had a mini ski jump, where you climbed a tower and snowboarded down a ramp that looked like it was packed with actual snow that they must have manufactured somehow, and you landed in a big foam pit.

And yeah, there was an ice rink, the main attraction, and most of the skaters were in shorts and t-shirts, and the quality of the ice didn’t look that great--and how could it--but still, a winter carnival in the southwest, where

people flocked to get *out* of the cold weather in *their* part of the country, and it was definitely Christmas-time turned upside down.

He and Jack were shaky out there but Dave and Eva weren't bad, on account of living in Idaho, Pike figured . . . but wow, yeah, here came Andrea, effortlessly gliding around the rink and passing up most of the other skaters. And then when she leaned forward a couple times and really cranked it out, not slowing down one bit around the turns, she had the body position and mannerisms of the Olympians you saw on TV.

There were two girls skating together and they were wearing identical ASU baseball caps and giggling as they passed by.

"They're flirting with us," Jack said. "You think?"

"Hard to know," Pike said. "They keep lapping us, so they might be laughing *at* us, rather than flirting *with* us."

"That's a good point."

"I know. I'm more perceptive than you. More grey matter in the front of the brain."

Jack said, "You're saying though, I used bad judgment in following you down here?"

"No," Pike said, "I used poor judgment inviting you."

You could see Jack felt bad, and even though Pike wanted to rub it in, that was admittedly a low blow. Pike said, "I was joking. Sort of."

"I thought we got over it in Palm Springs . . . my little screw-up. Once we helped Dani and all . . . No?"

"Okay," Pike said, "you put it that way, your eyes getting all fluttery like you're going for an Academy Award . . . forget it. You're right, I'm past it." Not quite the case, but good enough. Pike told himself to stop being an ass.

"Tell you what," Jack said. "I'll make it up to you."

"Uh-oh."

"Those two girls? Which one you want to skate with?"

Pike thought about the question. Not so much which one he was more interested in, but what Jack had in mind exactly. This could be entertaining, so Pike said the shorter one.

Jack nodded like he was a waiter who'd just taken someone's order and was heading matter-of-factly back to the kitchen--Pike thinking, what a cocky attitude on the guy--but son of a gun, it did play out pretty dang simple, and a minute later here came the shorter one skating over to Pike, extending her hand, big grin, and identifying herself as Heather.

Pike was afraid to shake it actually, because he thought he might end up off balance and fall down, but he took a chance, and it was fine, and he said, "I'm going to level with you upfront . . . I'm from a dusty hick town in the Central Valley--that's California . . . not sure what that guy told you, but I can't skate worth beans."

"I noticed," Heather said, and there was a gleam in her eye, a little friendly mischief to it, and Pike figured okay, this might not be *overly*-embarrassing.

So Heather took his hand again and they did 3 or 4 laps and they got the essentials out of the way . . . she was a freshman at Arizona State and she lived in the dorms, but her family lived in Glendale, which was why she was still around during Christmas break.

Pike explained that *he* was going to Fresno State, also living in the freshmen dorms, and his parents *didn't* live around here but he and his friend Jack were taking up another friend on an invitation to come down for the holidays . . . so what do you know.

"How's the food in your dorm?" Heather said. "Ours is kind of snarky."

Pike was thinking she used the wrong word but he got the idea. "Ours isn't bad. I mean as far institutional stuff goes."

"Do you have a meal plan, or what?"

"Uh, yeah. I do."

"What's your roommate like?" she said. "Mine, we're close. It took a while, and she had this boyfriend, and he kept coming over, but then they broke up."

“Where’s she from?” Pike said, hoping not to answer any more questions about his fake college experience and fake dorm life. He was thinking he at least should have used one of the JC’s . . . Jeez.

“She’s from Andalusia, Illinois,” Heather said.

“Sounds complicated,” Pike said. “Or at least small.”

“It is. I was curious, I had to search for it on a map. It’s right against the border of Iowa . . . Effie says there’s a place that sells hot dogs on a stick? Where you cross a street to get there? When you do, you’re eating in Iowa.”

“I like dogs on a stick,” Pike said, and Heather looked at him a little funny for a second and then she smiled and nodded, and Pike thought this could get interesting, you never know.

“You still haven’t told me about yours,” she said.

Uh-oh.

Pike started to say, “Well, how would you put it . . . he was one of those guys that blended in . . . except at meals, I mean there, he could really put it away . . .” And he was trying to come up with a name for the fake roommate, and this really was getting ridiculous--though obviously you couldn’t reverse yourself and tell Heather you were still in high school. Honesty definitely not being the best policy there.

Heather was listening intently and Pike unfortunately felt a bunch more questions coming on, but then Heather was looking past him and said, “Hey, isn’t that your friend?”

Pike turned around and across the rink there was Eva, down on the ice, Dave helping her, and Andrea noticing what was going on and getting over there quick, and one of the rink attendants was on his way as well.

Eva was sitting up but you could hear her crying, which wasn’t good, and worse, unless someone had spilled something red, which would be a huge coincidence, it sure looked like blood on the ice.

“What the heck,” Pike said.

“I know,” Heather said. “Did someone, like, run over her with a skate?”

“No idea,” Pike said, but it was kind of shaping up that way as he took in the whole scene, Eva appearing to be clutching her left hand and some older guy with a baggy sweater and a big gut standing there off to the side looking pretty helpless.

Dave and Andrea and the attendant got her up and they skated her off the rink and into the little DJ booth next to the snack bar, and a few minutes later Eva emerged with her hand wrapped up in gauze, and trying to smile it off like it was no big deal, though Pike figured no matter how you spin it, it couldn't feel good getting run over by an ice skate.

Dave said, a little shaky, “The manager says we should take her in. That she might need some stitches. Which I'm tending to agree with.”

“Most definitely,” Andrea said. “Good to make sure of everything.”

There were benches, and everyone, including Jack, was taking off their skates and changing to their street shoes. “I saw you go down,” Jack said to Eva, “but I didn't see what happened next.”

Which Pike could understand, Jack emerging as the worst skater of the group, even worse than he was, and when you were doing all you could to just stay on your feet your scope of what else was going on was limited.

“It was my fault,” Eva said, “I looked over my shoulder for some silly reason and I stumbled and put out my hand to brace my fall . . . The gentleman couldn't help himself.” Meaning the helpless-looking guy, who Pike noticed now was still out there skating, which kind of ticked him off, but you couldn't control people.

Someone pointed them to an urgent care place that was open late and did the job quicker than an emergency room, and Dave tried to joke that who knows, we may even make it back for the second session. Though Dave looked kind of white as he said this, and Pike figured he'd gotten a good look at Eva's hand before they wrapped it and it must not have looked great.

Meanwhile Pike asked Heather for her number, pointing out that he'd probably be around for a couple more days, at least that was the plan . . . and

Heather gave him a coy smile and said, “You never know,” and she gave it to him and found her girlfriend and Pike figured that might be that.

The urgent care was only a few blocks away and they were perfectly accommodating--right up to actually getting Eva seen by a doctor. There seemed to be only one guy on duty tonight, an older fellow, and you could hear him taking his time with the patients ahead of Eva--thorough, but Pike thinking *come on*.

Eva was trying to keep it light, making small talk, clearly embarrassed by dragging everyone here but at the same time she looked increasingly in pain, and finally they brought her back and cleaned the wound and stitched her up, and they gave her a prescription and told her to keep an eye on it, that it may be an uncomfortable couple days, and there you were.

“I never asked,” Pike said when they were back outside, “but where’re you all staying? I mean you’re not, like, sleeping in the car, right?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Are we good?”

Dave took a second too long and said, “Nah, we got it handled, thanks for asking.”

“Okay, no you *don’t* then,” Pike said, looking at Jack and Andrea. You couldn’t blame Dave and Eva, Pike had dangled the invitation back then and they took him up on it spur of the moment--meaning go for it, have a little adventure and just wing it--including the accommodations part--or even stay out all night, which is how Pike could see himself maybe handling it too, if he was in their shoes.

Andrea was already on the phone to Lucy, Pike thinking dang, isn’t that a little late to be bothering her, but admittedly Lucy was gritty. Andrea hung up and said, “We have it covered,” and that was enough, they all caravaned it back up to Anthem and Lucy greeted Eva with a big smile and had a cup of hot tea brewing and some sweet biscuits warming, and Eva thanked her profusely but Lucy cut her off with a smile, as all in a day’s work.

So Andrea and Eva stayed there, and Pike, Jack and Dave hoofed it back over to Mitch’s--and unlike Lucy, Mitch *was* in a crabby mood after being woken

up, but if he noticed Dave he didn't say anything and he went back to bed pretty quick, and Pike gave Dave the couch and unfortunately ended up on the floor next to Jack.

But they were all pretty beat and everyone slept solid until Mitch's phone rang at 4:30 in the morning.

Mitch came out of the bedroom rubbing his eyes. "That was Lucy," he said. "You dropped someone over there? It sounds like you did. Anyhow, she's having a reaction, Lucy says, to an injury."

Everyone sat up straight and Jack said, "Reaction . . . how? What'd they say?"

"It was unclear. Just that Lucy's taking her in."

"Well, where?" Dave said, and they all scrambled to their feet and Pike made a quick introduction, and Mitch shook hands with Dave and said, "Not sure, they were in the car, Lucy was driving her. They said they were going to call it in."

Pike didn't like the sound of this--call *what* in? Like a 911 kind of call, we're talking?

Dave was surely thinking the same thing, his eyes were wide, and Mitch picked up on it and said, "Gentleman. Let's not blow anything out of proportion. When I had my case of shingles, I thought I was out of the woods, and then I had a middle-of-the night reaction as well . . . Your friend is in good hands."

"Yeah well, whatever," Jack said, "but let's please get a move on, wherever they're headed to."

Mitch volunteered to drive and when they got to the Interstate he handed Pike the phone and Pike called Lucy, except *she* handed her phone to Andrea, who handed it to Eva, and Pike put Dave on.

There were some, 'Unh-huhs?' and 'Whens?' and a couple 'How does it feel *nows?*' followed by a 'Babe, don't worry', and Dave hung up.

"What?" Jack said. "The pain acting up bad?"

"Yeah, and she feels like she has a fever," Dave said, and to Mitch: "They told them to go to Horizon Medical."

“Got it, north Phoenix,” Mitch said, stepping on it a bit, which made Pike nervous, on top of the fever business--if Mitch was reacting now as well--and no one said much for the half hour it took and they pulled into the ER parking lot, pretty empty right now, little bit of sun coming up, and Pike recognized Lucy’s older green Volvo, and they all went charging in.

The desk attendant said it would be a couple minutes. They had Eva in an examining cubicle with sliding curtains and finally the doctor came out, a friendly young guy with a southern accent, and he informed Dave and Jack and Pike and Mitch that Eva’s wound has contracted a bit of an infection, and thus the corresponding fever--perfectly normal, under the circumstances--and that he administered some intravenous antibiotics, and she should be good to go . . . except that for observational purposes they wanted to admit her for 24 hours.

Lucy and Andrea were waving from the cubicle as the doctor was talking, and you could see Eva try to smile and wave with her good hand--and soon there were two orderlies with a gurney and they were wheeling her upstairs.

Mitch said he’d find a Starbucks and pick up a bunch of breakfast sandwiches, and he was taking orders, and Pike uncharacteristically had no appetite, except unfortunately--and alarmingly--he wasn’t surprised.

Mitch came back and by this point the others were up in Eva’s room and Pike intercepted Mitch in the lobby and asked him to come outside after he delivered the food.

Ten minutes went by and Mitch popped out of the elevator and said, “I didn’t go in, didn’t want to intrude. Lucy told me in the hall the hand had swelled up like a boxing glove before she called this morning, and that a specialist is on his way in now to have a look.”

“That’s not good,” Pike said. “I don’t have a good feeling about this. What might happen.”

“Don’t be silly,” Mitch said. “But sidetracking for a second--how’d you guys *let* that happen, anyway? Some *old* guy, they said, he skated *over* her?”

“Not that old, but yeah, he should have been able to avoid it . . . It was like . . . it was meant to happen.”

Mitch was distracted, watching an attractive woman wheel an elderly person out to a waiting car, and it took a moment to absorb what Pike said, but then he was in tune.

“Don’t go there kid,” he said. “You’re overthinking. Not to mention overreacting.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Ooh boy. Meant to happen, *how?*”

“Well what do *you* think? You know my deal. In fact you’re about my only confidante--which is sad.”

Mitch looked hurt and Pike knew he went too far. “I didn’t mean it like that, it came out wrong, don’t take me so *literal*. Dang.”

“*Literal-ly*,” Mitch said, but he’d perked up again. “Okay kid, you better run me through this, whatever’s on your mind.”

And Pike was a little confused himself--what with Hannamaker on his plate still, and the slightly bizarre Dani stop on the way here, and Christmas in the mix--did he ever fill Mitch in, the Round 2 business with Chuck? Or even the Round 1?

“You got *me* mixed up,” Pike said, “meaning between what’s on my mind, normal, and what *found* its way onto my mind.”

“Ooh boy,” Mitch said.

“Lot of details, not worth going into, and you’re liable to challenge me on some of them, or worse, ask a bunch of questions.”

“Fine, I get it.”

“Anyhow. Cutting to the chase--Eva and Dave aren’t supposed to be here.”

Mitch was absorbing this. “I see . . . and if I might ask, they’re not supposed to be here, *because* . . .”

“Because of *me*, what did you *think* I was getting at? You mean like Jack met ‘em in line at a Taco Bell, in Needles for example on the way here? That what you were expecting?”

“Probably not, no,” Mitch said.

“They bailed me out twice in Idaho,” Pike said. “Can’t remember if it was the first or second incarnation, but somewhere in there I invited them here for Christmas . . . Either way, I was already *here*, when I *invited* them, otherwise I wouldn’t know I’d *be* here.”

This would have sounded bizarre to an innocent bystander overhearing the conversation--in fact they might have thought Pike had mental health issues--but Mitch understood the essentials. “You’re saying,” he said, “you were busy trying to *correct* something . . .”

“Yeah. Correct it, and then reverse the *correction*.”

“And it had nothing to do with Dave and Eva . . .” Mitch was rubbing his chin, putting it together.

“And this is a freaking *bi-product*,” Pike said. “It’s going to get worse.”

“Eva, you’re referring to. *She’s* going to get worse? . . . I have to tell you, I think she’s in good hands.” Mitch pointed upstairs. “I’ll admit, if Lucy hadn’t reacted as she did, in timely fashion, there *could* have been a bit of a crisis for your friend.”

“Come on man, don’t fight me here, *please*? I’m getting a major headache, and I’m not sure what to do about it.”

“Take an Advil. I have some in the glove compartment.”

“Not the headache. The *hand*. Eva’s predicament. I’ll say it again, I have a negative feeling here.”

Jack and Andrea came out of the elevator with Lucy.

Andrea said, “She’s sleeping, she seems comfortable. Dave’s with her.”

“In that case,” Mitch said, “let me take you all out for a real breakfast. I know the place. Nothing like good home cooking to recharge the batteries. Not to mention take the stress level down a couple notches.”

Everyone said that sounded good, and Mitch put his arm around Lucy and thanked her for having such an alert bedside manner.

Everyone except Pike. But he followed them out of the hospital lobby, got in someone’s car and went along.

Chapter 2

“See now, these type situations,” Mitch was saying, in Joe’s Crabshack Diner . . . the whole thing out of whack for North Phoenix--the *name*, the fact that they were all eating fish and chips at 9:30 in the *morning*, and worse, that Mitch was holding court, la-di-da, as though nothing had happened.

“Please continue,” Lucy said.

Pike thought of something else, totally irrelevant at the moment--but that at some point he’d speak to Lucy about whatever supposed UFO incident she witnessed as a child in 1956, since it was shaping up more and more like that business was having a profound effect on *his* life. In fact *dominating* it.

Lucy was a sweet gal, that’s for sure, and it was a good bet she was harboring some of her *own* secrets as a result of that day.

It wasn’t like they were tied together, the two of them--not quite--but you’d be an idiot to think there wasn’t *any* connection.

Mitch swallowed, dabbed his mouth with a napkin, unfortunately missing some tartar sauce. He said, “Point *being*, a hospital visit--particularly an unintended one--it can be nerve-wracking, but that wears off quickly. I had to drive my sister once. I was 17, just got my license, my parents were out, and my little sister, we had a swing-set in the backyard, and she cracks a tooth.”

Pike blocked it out from there, Mitch delusional if he’s trying to compare that (or his early shingles story) to this, *Eva’s* plight currently. Fine, the guy’s trying to relax everyone, that’s part of it, but it wasn’t working. In fact now Andrea, Jack and Lucy were *re-focused* on Eva and asking questions and not convinced at all by Mitch trying to put it in perspective.

“What’s the next step, you think?” Jack said.

“Well,” Andrea said, “don’t they simply wait for the antibiotics to take effect? Re-evaluate then?”

Pike wasn’t going to add anything, to scare the *daylights* out of anyone, but dang, you worried what happens if they *don’t* take effect?

You didn’t want to go there, but he couldn’t help thinking about a guy on the LA Clippers a couple years ago--it was in the news--they’re playing on the road at Philadelphia and mid-3rd quarter there’s a collision under the basket, and the guy gets gashed on the shoulder by a tooth of a Philly player.

Not a big deal--at first--but by the time they’re showered and on the team bus headed to the airport the guy’s arm is a mess, and they get him on a private jet and fly him back to LA, and the son of a gun--great athlete and physical specimen, right in his prime--ends up in intensive care . . . and it’s touch and go for a week whether he’s going to lose the dang arm.

The guy pulled through and is back playing ball but it was a heckuva scare. They named the thing, a long medical word that ended with *orosis* . . . one of those. Pike could relate better to the rag papers on the racks when you checked out of Safeway, which had occasional photos of people who were being hammered by flesh-eating bacteria . . . and when you thought about it, an ice-skate blade, which had picked up God knows what before it ran over Eva, could do the same thing. Still, it would be a freak occurrence for sure, but common sense told you it *could* work that way.

Epecially, when the poor girl who got run over . . . *wasn’t supposed to BE here.*

Pike hadn’t done a whole *lot* of travelling--the window for this stuff had been relatively short--but he’d experienced enough weird *pieces* of incidents to know that when something is ‘abnormally influenced’ to start with--that all bets are off.

They went for ice cream, not your ordinary after-breakfast deal, but without mentioning that fact, everyone was happy to kill time.

Lucy and Andrea were saying, maybe they could bring something back to the room for Dave--and maybe even Eva--that the place had a slow-melt container for, such as an ice cream log cake?

Mitch liked the idea and pulled out another 20 bucks--one thing you had to admit, the guy was generous--and Lucy and Andrea took a while and picked something out, and they even got a get-well message squirted on it by the ice cream scooper.

It was a nice gesture and they got back in the cars, Pike with Mitch, and Jack and Andrea with Lucy, and everyone was full and relatively upbeat, and Pike started thinking maybe he'd been jumping the gun after all, his brain getting illogically carried away with worst case scenarios.

Except right about then his phone buzzed and it was a simple text from Dave:

a little worse here

Pike said to Mitch, "Let's don't fool around please. I'm not getting the greatest updates, all of a sudden."

Mitch said, "Real updates? Or . . . you know."

"Come *on*," Pike said, and Mitch got the picture and did hightail it back to the hospital pretty quick, Pike at one point surprised Mitch didn't get a ticket, when it was questionable if he made a yellow light, and there was a cop sitting at the intersection.

The nurse when you came off the elevator, who likely had been pretty casual the first time, when they admitted Eva and things seemed routine, looked tense now as they passed her station--not a good omen.

There were five medical people in Eva's room. Two in blue, who you figured were nurses or assistants, and three in white cotton coats, who unfortunately were full-fledged doctors.

Dave was outside the doorway giving the medical people space, and the guy looked much worse than two hours ago, almost like *he* was the patient.

The discussion in the room was serious and subdued, but you could pick up bits and pieces. The gist of it, the doctors' conclusion, was they were going to

perform surgery ASAP to cut away some flesh . . . one of them explaining to Eva, who was sedated but awake, that they'd remove as little as possible to contain the infection, and to not worry, she'd be fine.

Just a couple minutes after that, a crew appeared with all kinds of equipment, and they whisked Eva out of there.

Chapter 3

There was an open plaza across the street from the hospital, and not knowing what else to do they all went over there. Now you had the brutal waiting period, everything uncharted and unknown.

Lucy was sitting with Dave at a picnic table, reassuring him, and she patted his hand occasionally. Dave was a mess.

Jack and Andrea were laying on the grass, going on and off their phones, then staring into space, not saying much.

Mitch and Pike were talking privately on a far bench.

Pike said, "I have to go back there. You know it and I know it."

"Okay take it easy my friend," Mitch said. "With all due respect--and mind you, I'm not entirely disagreeing with you--but don't you think you're jumping the gun? Just a hair?"

"No," Pike said.

"Oh," Mitch said. He cleared his throat. "Well if you *have* to . . . how would you go about it?"

"That's what I'm asking *you* . . . You've always been the big shot with the answers. The . . . suggested *Rules* modifications . . . the *pre-1956* business . . . those are for starters . . . So I'm not saying big-shot as a negative, necessarily."

"Speaking of which," Mitch said, "not sure I confirmed this with you--did you ever *try* it . . . *post 1956*?"

"No. I've been tempted . . . But all that energy."

"Wasted, you're implying."

Pike said, "Whatever. *Probably*. I mean . . . no *other* part of my situation makes any sense--and you know exactly what I'm talking about--the silver mine, the lab, the preposterous dental business--so why should 1956 mean anything."

“But?”

“So. Reversing it. Might as well lump 1956 *in* there, since it’s *all* a joke.”

Pike’s voice cracked slightly and Mitch was silent for a minute. It was easy to lose sight of the strain Pike--or anyone--would be under, since the ill-fated football game incident last fall. The kid had adjusted obviously, had done plenty of good in the world--and that would be an *understatement*--but there had to be negative moments, where he’d be logically frustrated . . . the *What’s Happening To Me?* part.

Mitch said, quieter, “Look son. You don’t *have* to do *anything*. Let’s get that straight right now.” Nodding at Pike, meeting his eyes.

“I know,” Pike said. “And I keep apologizing, for taking cheap shots at you. I know you’re in my corner.”

“All right, that means a lot,” Mitch said, and *his* voice cracked slightly, and Pike said fine, now that they got the sappy soap opera out of the way, what was the plan?

“Okay. Unnecessary as it still may be,” Mitch said, “are you talking, go back there at Halloween again, and . . . *don’t* invite them down here for Christmas?”

“Come on man,” Pike said. “I wish. But that line of thinking, you’re already violating some principle you drummed into me.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. You gotta go deeper.”

“Unh-huh. I could either try to go *real* deep--such as find out when one of them’s family--say Dave’s--moved to Pocatello in the first place.”

“Might be dealing with a few generations though,” Mitch said.

“Could. Either way, simpler, I’m thinking, is stop ‘em from getting together.”

“Ah. As boyfriend and girlfriend . . . I see where you’re going--as contrasted to your previous incident. *One* of your previous incidents.”

Pike hadn’t thought of it just now, but fair enough. The Milburns--you did have to go deep enough there to prevent them from ever moving to Beacon. But those circumstances were a little different. You had a marriage, with offspring on

the way. In other words, some *destiny* working against you. Likely trickier to mess with.

Eva and Dave . . . who *knows*, they might have started dating a week or two before they picked up Pike hitchhiking. Shouldn't be a big deal . . . Except they always were.

Dave and Lucy were walking over now, all-business, Pike assuming Dave had received an update, and Dave said, "She's out, they said . . . They got her in ICU, they said . . . Just as a precaution."

Mitch told Dave thanks for that, but you could tell Mitch was starting to get rattled now. On the way back to the hospital Pike said to Dave, as casually as he could, "So Bud. How long you two been going out, anyhow?"

"Sophomore year," Dave said right away.

"Umm," Pike said.

"Is there a problem?"

"No. Why would you say *that*?"

"You reacted a little odd-ball there," Dave said, but you could tell Dave was cool with talking about it, and why not, it was probably therapeutic. "Anyways," Dave continued. "It was one of those deals, history class, the teacher, he switched the seating around, and we ended up next to each other. And she said how are you doing, and I was pretty sure right then I was going to marry her . . . You know what I'm talking about, how that can work?"

"No," Pike said, "but glad to hear it," he lied. *Holy Smokes*. This was turning into *more* of a mess. Either it wouldn't work, because you *didn't* go deep enough, based on this new unfortunate strength of relationship information . . . and if it did, you'd be upending what sure sounded like a dang serious bond.

On the other hand . . . you couldn't afford to screw around here. This was easily turning into life and death for Eva upstairs--or downstairs now, or wherever the heck the Intensive Care unit was, despite the latest spin from the doctors.

A footnote on that professional ballplayer had been, according to one expert they quoted in the paper, was forget about him maybe losing the *arm*, that'd be the *least* of it--it's the full *body* infection you're worried about.

"That sophomore year," Pike said to Dave, "what month was that, do you remember?"

"Why?" Dave said, a little edge again this time, as though he *had* said enough about the subject, and what difference would a detail like that make?

"No reason," Pike said, "I'm sorry."

"Nah that's ok. I'm placing it now . . . basketball practice had already started, we were early into it, but we hadn't had any games yet, so I'm thinking, November?"

"You're supposed to know this stuff automatically. Anniversaries and all." Pike trying to keep it light, but Dave didn't smile.

They were entering the lobby. Pike said, "And you guys . . . you're seniors, correct?" Pike was pretty sure on the first incarnation they were, but who knows about the second, whether it ever came up.

Dave nodded and got in the elevator, and Pike let him go, and Dave held the door for Mitch and Jack and Andrea and Pike's mind was racing and his heart was beating fast, and he turned and went back outside, having an *idea* of what now, but also seriously *wondering*, what now.

Chapter 4

The first thorn in your side down here, as it had been with the re-visit to Chuck, was where to start from. Mitch called it the launch point, but that seemed a little extreme, but regardless, there weren't a lot of obvious 60-plus year-old structures in downtown Phoenix, or technically *North* Phoenix, but Pike's impression was that applied to Scottsdale and Tempe and Chandler and the other suburbs too, which all felt like they sprung up from the desert in the last quarter-century.

He had gotten a little lucky with Chuck actually, by spotting a ranch up near Antheneum that had an old barn still standing. He supposed worst scenario you could head back up there, but it was an hour away and then you needed to navigate it cross country on foot a mile or so, and there were some cattle loose and who knows if that included any bulls, and the barn itself was kind of creepy.

So Pike called an Uber.

It was weird, it had actually only been a couple days--in real time--since his last episode, the revision with Chuck, but he felt out-of-practice somehow, like he'd had a long layoff. Maybe there was something too that. Did real time behave differently in the **10 Rules**? Pike couldn't remember if that part was addressed--but right now, what did it matter, you had a job to do.

He said to the Uber guy, "Are there, like, any older monuments around here? I wouldn't mind visiting one."

"You mean that'd be your total destination?" the driver said. "That's it?"

"Sure. I have some time to kill, I'm good with doing a little sightseeing."

Pike thinking ouch, he could have put it a lot differently.

"Welp," the driver said, "ASU has an anthropology one. That's always fun. Lots of native American stuff, going way back."

Pike was googling the place . . . and it looked like it was built in 1974, despite what the guy was telling him, the contents going back centuries.

“What else?” Pike said. “Like maybe, an old wooden church, or something?”

The guy was thinking. “Hmm. You’re throwing me a curveball here Buddy. What, you’re like an architect?”

“More of an artist I guess,” Pike said, thinking let me out of here, this was a bad idea.

“There *is* that old church on Rodney Place,” the guy said. “At least I think it’s old. They facelifted it, but I’m guessing it goes back 50 years, maybe more.”

50 years would put it roughly in the 70’s, the same age as the museum the guy suggested, but Pike was flashing on Eva in the ICU and said let’s give it a shot please, and it was a couple miles and the guy dropped him.

The church, St. Ignacio’s, did stand out, considering the rest of the neighborhood was nondescript tract housing, and fortunately when Pike went inside it *was* clear it was old enough. It had that smell and the feel and the high stained glass windows that *told* you old. Confirming this was a small plaque in the entry foyer, *Established 1941*, and thanking a bunch of original people back then who helped make it happen.

The *un*-fortunate part, there was a man sitting up front praying pretty heavy, and a woman along the side corridor lighting a candle . . . And you couldn’t use this place, you just couldn’t. Pike wasn’t particularly religious--his family rarely went to church, and people could judge that as they may--but the point here being you weren’t going to violate the spirit of faith by using this church as a vehicle to do your thing. Even if you found an attic or back room or something. You just weren’t.

So . . . that didn’t work, and Pike stepped back outside into the mid-day sunshine. It was dang bright down here, even for December, and you had to squint your eyes.

There was a homeless guy camped out on the sidewalk around the side of the church. Pike was thinking the church probably gave him some food and

necessities, which would make sense. They weren't going to *house* the guy, but they weren't going to call the cops on him either, so the guy looked reasonably comfortable, considering.

It occurred to Pike that, as a bi-product of his tough circumstances, the guy might know another place. Pike said, "Is it possible you could recommend an old building? . . . That came out kind of funny."

"It came out fine, my friend," the guy said. "Sure, the Athenian School one." Gee, just like that, nice and simple, no asking him what *for*.

"Which is *where*, please?" Pike said.

"She's on 3rd and Mason. 3rd *Street*, not Avenue." The man sort of pointing to his left, his finger waving around.

Pike looked it up. Built in the 1920's. Jeez, looking like . . . 26, 27 blocks from here. Technically in Mesa.

He said to the homeless guy, "Is it . . . can I get in there?"

"That you can," the guy said. "I've *been* there. That's how I know."

Pike dug in his wallet and started handing the guy a \$20, and the guy was happy and reached for it, and Pike realized he may need that back in Pocatello--or wherever--in fact he could for sure, so he pulled it back and gave the guy a \$5, which might leave him short as well, but what could you do.

Meanwhile this was starting to feel more than a little desperate, the clock-ticking on the Eva-business mounting, and you had to *get* there before you worried about not having enough cash . . . and much as he hated to--and not being all that convinced that the building *would* work--Pike took off running.

This wouldn't be the first time, and admittedly running was easier since he'd developed . . . whatever this extra strength stuff *was*.

He stopped short of thinking of it as 'powers'--since he hoped every day he'd wake up and be back to normal-- meaning before he put the tackle on that guy Anthony in the game.

You did sweat a lot down here, and halfway there Pike was wondering--if this was December, how the heck people handled it in the summer, or even the spring. More important right now though was planning ahead, how you could

made it happen quick if you were miraculously able to use the Anthenian School as needed.

Two years ago, Dave and Eva's sophomore year--you had to zero in on that. Very specifically. He checked his phone as he ran, set up Tunein.com with hit songs from back then. Meaning the fall of 2014.

He recognized a bunch of titles, stuck with the ones where he liked the melodies. You had 'All About That Bass' by Meghan Trainor, 'Stay With Me'--Sam Smith, 'Blank Space' by Taylor Swift, 'Thinking Out Loud'--Ed Sheeran. A few decent other songs as well, added to the mix.

It also seemed wise--and wise was a strange word choice, since *none* of this was wise, and none of it *ever* made sense . . . but it helped out before, probably, to associate news events of the day, as you attempted to spin your way there.

So he pulled up USA Today from the date he was shooting for now, November 1st, staying with 2014, which was a Saturday . . . There was nothing he remotely recognized in the national news that day, zippo. So for sure, that wasn't going to help.

He tried the eastern Idaho papers, and again, nothing he recognized, but . . . there'd been an all-out search and rescue mission, a family getting separated on an overgrown trail in the foothills, which everyone said they shouldn't have been fooling around with this close to winter--but anyhow they found them all in decent-enough condition after an all-night search, helicoptered them to the hospital as necessary, and everyone involved was in an celebratory mood.

So yeah, why not zero in on this event, even if you weren't aware of it before. The last thing, the most important this time, Pike was reminding himself, was focus on: *Whatever happens, don't end up on the side of the Interstate again.*

That was twice now he'd gone through that, fallen way short of Pocatello, barely across the Idaho border from Utah. He set up a photo on his phone, the Super 8 motel that he liked, smack in the middle of actual Pocatello.

He came around the final corner, 3rd and Marone, Mason a block ahead, and you could see the school, it was big, and also boarded up. If you had to guess

it was one of those community preservation deals, where they weren't going to tear it down without a fight.

Pike had noticed something else when he looked it up, it said the school was the outside set for a Netflix series, and fair enough, you could picture that, a depiction of old small-town USA--so long as they isolated the shots of the school and didn't let anyone know it was actually Phoenix.

The place wasn't just boarded up, the doors were chained as well, both front and back, and Pike was getting a real lousy feeling. But you couldn't dismiss the homeless guy, he seemed lucid enough, and it seemed unlikely he'd make *up* the fact that he'd been inside . . . So Pike took a second walk around the place, a little slower.

He noticed the basement doors toward the back and told himself, uh-oh, this wouldn't be great. In fact he kind of hoped this *wouldn't* work. Meaning, these two flat steel-plate doors that came together at ground level . . . and if you ended up getting them open you dropped down steep, to God knows where.

Pike tried the right hand one, and sure enough--with the rest of the building secured like Fort Knox--wouldn't you know it swung right open. Though *creaked* would be more accurate.

He could make out a wooden ladder leading up to the doors, and not much else. Pike looked around outside, for one to see if anyone was looking, and two, to see if miraculously there was a different older building anywhere in sight and he wouldn't have to go through this . . . but no, the coast was clear, there was no other visible option--and you *had* to go through with this . . . so Pike took a deep breath and climbed down the ladder.

You could hear stuff scurrying around down there, hopefully nothing *flying* around but maybe that too. The worst part was not being able to see well enough to establish your sit-down point. The light from the phone helped some, and unfortunately it required cutting through one room that was full of crates to another that was empty enough and should (you prayed) do the job.

Pike was thinking this would be, what his 4th or 5th attempt at this stuff--and that was probably low, there were test trips and short ones mixed in--but either way if could you ever summon up an *Express* trip, this would be it.

He got right down to business and closed his eyes and began his focus. The news of the day . . . the soundtrack . . . and of course the focus on that Super 8 motel, which meant the *non-focus* on Interstate 15, the superhighway from Salt Lake City to Pocatello.

A couple minutes went by, and Pike opened his eyes a slit, and there was a moment of panic--this wasn't going to work, he'd lost his touch--and then something started shaking in the room, you couldn't tell what, and then there was the familiar rolling . . . and spinning . . . and Pike steadied himself for what was next.

Chapter 5

What you noticed right away was how cold it was. Not just temperature-wise, but there was a nasty wind hitting you in the face as well.

Then a horn honked. Not great, especially since whoever it was laid on the horn solid and it then got real loud and then quickly faded softer, like a distant freight train passing in the night.

When the second horn blared, same intensity, same quick passing fade--Pike opened his eyes.

And Holy Toledo, a semi truck was a quarter mile away, coming toward him, *its* horn now blaring full blast.

It took Pike a second to absorb this. *If I'm not dreaming, I'm on a freeway. Aren't I?*

He was surprised how casually he was considering this, it was like watching himself in a movie, nothing *actual* to worry about.

Except the air horn again from the semi, the guy bearing down on him in the fast line, not able to change lanes because the right lane was clogged with traffic--and Pike waited another second like an idiot, trying to get everything straight, and finally dived into the weeds on the center meridian, in time, but not by much.

Unbelievable.

He recognized where he was, it was the same stretch of Interstate 15, Salt Lake City to Pocatello, that Dave and Eva had picked him up on--except those two times he at least was on the shoulder.

What he was putting together now--and this was something you might ask Mitch about, and maybe Frankie the librarian, if he ever *saw* them again . . .

which was, by focusing so hard on *not* ending up here, did he therefore end up here *worse*?

The thing now, slightly more important--was don't get your rear end run over.

You'd think hoofing it across two lanes to at least get *on* the shoulder wouldn't be that hard, but he found out quickly that it was tough to gauge speed at this level, the speed limit probably 75, which meant plenty of guys bombing along at 85, 90 . . . and you see a vehicle looking lot a dot way south and by the time you took a tentative step into the first lane that same vehicle was about five times the size and gaining on you lightening quick.

So he had a few false starts, and eventually it was clear enough to where you felt safe, and Pike scampered across and he was on the eastern shoulder of the interstate, not where he'd hoped to land, that was *for sure* . . . but at least in the right state, thank God, so you couldn't go crazy obsessing about it.

People weren't as friendly today as when Dave and Eva picked him up pretty quickly both times, though maybe they were the exception and this was normal. Pike had his thumb out for 10 minutes with no luck, and he thought maybe it's too hard to stop short along here even if someone wanted to pick him up, and he started walking toward what looked like an exit sign that he could make out up the road, that was probably a mile away.

Halfway there a policeman stopped, a state trooper. As the officer got out of the car Pike thought ooh boy, how do I explain this--and worse, if the guy's in a bad mood, could he actually bring me in and *charge* me with something?

The ID part might be an issue as well--*that* little, minor deal--since he'd gotten his driver's license last year . . . meaning in 2015--which happened to be a year *after* what year they were in right now.

And that was assuming Pike got *that* year part right, from back in the cellar of the old school.

It was all kind of scary, and he gulped and said hello to the officer, who first asked him if he was okay.

Pike didn't like to lie, especially to the authorities, but he figured it might be his bet best here . . . and he said thank you he's fine, but he got a ride from Salt Lake and they had an argument and the person unfortunately stopped and told him to get out.

The cop was sympathetic, whether he fully believed the story or not, and told Pike to call him Ron, and where was headed, *before* he got thrown out--and Pike said the first thing that came to mind, which was downtown Pocatello.

"Old Town or New?" the officer said.

Pike didn't know there *was* an Old Town, but couldn't help laughing just a little and said either one would work, and Ron laughed too, and Pike got in and they talked sports on the way, which Pike had to scramble a bit to keep things straight, as to who was doing what in the football, baseball and basketball world two years ago.

Ron dropped him on North Arthur Avenue, and Pike said thanks, and he definitely meant it, Ron was a good human, the kind of person you'd like to know for real--and before Ron drove away he asked how he was fixed for cash, and Pike hated to, but he said he *could* use a few bucks, and Ron forked over 40 dollars, and Pike choked up but tried not let Ron see that, and said goodbye.

Ron had sensed something obviously . . . and maybe there *were* angels in the world, or at least this incarnation of one, after all.

Separately, Pike was beating himself up for not going to a simple cash machine in Phoenix, *before* all this. They had one right in the hospital lobby for Gosh sakes. What was he thinking?

Speaking of that. How long was it going to take to wrap this up successfully--that is, if it *was* wrap-uppable?

Pike was counting stuff off on his fingers. The critical point being, how long could Eva survive, and he was fully convinced now that soon enough there'd be a crossroads where she wasn't going to make it.

And of course a day in *travel*, equating to an hour back *home* . . . Unless someone--or *something*--changed the rules on him, and that didn't seem likely.

So . . . three days here for example, and that would put you at what, 4 or 5 o'clock back in the hospital?

Pike's instinct was you'd be okay . . . but don't screw around either, that's for *darn* sure.

The other part he'd been rolling around, and you didn't want to think about it too directly but maybe you had to--and that was if Eva tragically did pass away, before you could make any alteration . . . did that then make it more difficult, or even *impossible* to undo?

You thought about Audrey's mom Mrs. Milburn, and some of Dani's work as well, and sure, he ultimately reversed some of those things (he hoped), but the difference was, those folks's situations occurred unbeknownst to Pike.

Here--Eva--not only was he aware of it in time to *do* something about it, but he *caused* it in the first place. No one was going to convince him otherwise. So the unknown question again--which Pike feared--was did this therefore play out differently than the others, and you were stuck with the worst scenario present-day outcome . . . if you let it get there?

You didn't want waste brain cells trying to conceive of the answer.

But, he reminded himself, you might *have* to, if you didn't get your *butt in gear* and get a *move* on.

And first things, what day was it--and more important, what *year*? Despite talking the sports with Ron and so on, and being relatively sure you got it right, you needed make sure.

The first parked car he noticed had a sticker on the license plate that said 15 . . . as did the second and third, so you figured this meant the registrations expired in 2015, which was a good sign and hopefully meant next year--if this was indeed November 1st or thereabouts as he prayed it was . . . and he decided let's not fool around, and at the risk of looking like clueless jerk--like on the college campus in Utah that time, and maybe a couple other places--he asked the first person coming his way on the sidewalk.

"Excuse me m'aam," he said. "Is today . . . what is today, I'm sorry, I woke up on the wrong side of bed."

The woman averted her eyes and increased her pace slightly and Pike picked up on something else, that it was legitimately cold here--middle of the afternoon, in the 30s tops, probably less--and he was in a dumb t-shirt, and that fact alone was probably attracting negative attention before you even blurted out the *what year is it* question.

And that may have been what Ron the officer was thinking too, by offering him some money, and Pike asked the next person where a thrift store might be, and he found a ten-dollar jacket, and at the register he was able to confirm that today was indeed Monday November 3rd, 2014.

So he'd overshoot it by two days but that part should still be fine. Here you were, but now what?

Standing there--and you probably *were* in Old Town, lots of old signs on buildings that were being used for other things, very few modern of anything . . . the exact opposite of Phoenix--Pike wondered how he could have been an idiot in one more way too, which is not asking Dave what the heck high school they went to.

He stopped in a sandwich shop and asked the guy making his, how many high schools there were, and luckily the guy didn't hesitate and look at him funny, he said 5, and named them off.

This wasn't a good development either. Pike supposed you could find Dave some other way. After all he had Dave's current cell number, and it might have been the same the two years earlier, though obviously you couldn't use your own current phone to call the guy.

Pike realized one more nugget of stupidity, that he actually didn't know Dave's last name, if you could believe it. He thought for a moment and remembered though that Eva's was Jorgensen, from the hospital, the label outside her room. Fortunate that he at least remembered that, and you might find a couple Jorgensens in a simple white pages search, and one could be her family.

Although . . . the flip side, could it screw something up--would you be somehow violating one of the **10 Rules**--to reach out to one of them directly?

Especially since you're currently in contact with both of them, in the present? In a circumstance *you* created . . .

Pike decided that was unknown territory, so why chance it, and in what was a familiar pattern with these trips he asked the sandwich guy where the nearest library might be, and the guy mentioned a city library north of here someplace, other side of the railroad yard and you continued on Center Street and so forth.

Or, the guy said, the state college had one too, and it was closer.

That sounded better, and in fact when Pike finished eating and went back outside there was a big S on a hill, which he'd noticed before but ignored, but now assumed was the college, and it didn't look all that far.

When he made it to the campus and found the library he'd hit the wall. Admittedly it had been a full day. Not just this part, but the waking up in the middle of the night business too, and there was a section of leather reading chairs and Pike didn't waste any time making himself at home in one and falling fast asleep.

After a while someone tapped him on the shoulder and he sat up straight, fast, and figured he was doing something wrong, but the person was only telling him his head was hanging way off the arm of the chair, in case he was worried about getting bumped into. Pike said thanks, re-adjusted his position, and was out cold for another hour.

When he woke up it was getting dark outside. He went on the public computer and got the 5 high schools sort of straight. One was a charter, so forget that, unlikely Dave and Eva were charter material. Of the other 4, 2 were local, meaning traditional Pocatello, and the final 2 were in the outlying more newly-developed areas.

Still, he needed this like a hole in the head, all because he didn't ask Dave the obvious question, and it was sure tempting to find a Jorgensen in the white pages and borrow someone's phone and make that call. Even if you got the wrong Jorgensen they'd probably direct you to the right one.

Then Pike got a bit of a brainstorm. Dave played basketball, and if you went school by school you might find something on one of the websites. Which sounded good, but in reality was pretty painstaking. You had rosters and schedules and names but a lot of it was disorganized, plus there were plenty of total guys name Dave and David and you needed a photo to give you a chance.

Plus, Pike realized, Dave would have only played freshman ball so far, if as he said he met Eva in November and remembered that because practice had just started, which would have been jv or varsity by then.

So Pike tried to review the freshman seasons of the 4 schools, and finally there were some photos, not headshots but action ones, and a Dave going for a layup for Cotter High School against Burleson last season sure looked a lot like Dave. Engle, was the guy's last name in the caption.

Pike roamed around the other teams and groups at Cotter, and eventually there was Eva, as part of the freshmen cheerleader squad, and Gee, looking pretty darn happy, and Jorgensen was in that caption.

Pike let out a big exhale. One way or another he'd be showing up there tomorrow. Not sure what tactic you were going to use. It wasn't a *major* problem, was it--*it only required stopping 2 people at the same school from ever getting together.*

Pike knew he had his hands full, but he had the night to work it around. The thing now, was where do you stay, since he was a little short. He had the \$20 he arrived with, plus Ron's \$40, and then the \$10 he used up for the jacket and the \$7 for the sandwich . . . leaving the grand total \$43.

Not good. At least he was here.

Chapter 6

One thing you weren't going to do on this trip, under any circumstances, was look up Dani. Nor did you want to run into her by accident. Pocatello was decent sized--you figured maybe 75,000 folks including the outlying areas, if they supported the 5 high schools--and that was a *lot* bigger than Beacon, so the odds were you wouldn't.

Still, you didn't want to take any chances, and you needed to leave sleeping dogs lie. The business with Chuck was settled--albeit precariously--and the other stuff, the guy she had the trouble with before, where she ended up wedging him between the wall studs, or whatever . . .

If you did have any more contact with her, it would have to be in real time, that's for sure. This was uncharted enough territory as it was.

Dani was a friend, and fine, a confidante as well, since they were in this together, however you'd *label* it . . . and Pike would admit he'd had a mild crush on the woman since Day 1.

But separately, he was ticked off at Dani, because if it wasn't for her, he wouldn't be in this mess.

Meaning--he never would have met Dave and Eva if he didn't get stuck having to come up here and bail her out, when she was no doubt headed to trial or worse for drowning Chuck in that hot tub.

So--even though it was a friendly enough place, Pike was getting real tired of Pocatello, Idaho, and you needed to leave Dani entirely out of the equation.

Meanwhile, Pike came out of the campus library and the scent of hot food in the air got the better of him, and without thinking too hard he followed it.

It was the dorm cafeteria, up a set of stairs from the library and across a big lawn, situated back past a large academic building.

There were 4 multi-story dorm buildings spaced out, with a low, flat building in the center, which had to be the cafeteria.

And dang, poking his head in, Pike could smell roasted meat and something Italian saucy, and some sweet baked desserts as well. He'd had a dull headache since he woke up--in fact forget that, he'd had it all day on account of the 4:30 alert, among other things--so bottom line, he was in one of those moods where you just *went* for it--and he explained politely to the attendant that he'd forgotten his card.

He'd picked up the fact that you needed one to eat, which was pretty obvious, one student after another sliding theirs into a slot and a little turnstile rotating and they were in, and the attendant sometimes added *have a nice meal*.

So she was friendly enough, a middle-aged mom type making a few extra bucks a couple hours a day . . . and she said to Pike, "That's perfectly fine. What is your room number please?"

"Ooh," Pike said. "You're asking the tough questions." The woman smiled, but was waiting.

He said, "This is kind of awkward, but I'm new here, I got a late start. I'm forgetting a lot of things so far, I guess . . . What the devil is my room number?" Pretending to be struggling with it big-time.

"That's fine," the woman chirped, nice and upbeat, her name tag identifying her as Sue-Ann, "what I can do, I can swing you a pass. Maybe write everything down next time though?"

Pike said he definitely would and she opened a drawer and pulled out a small form and filled it out and handed it to him and said for *him* to *have a nice meal* too.

Pike loaded up, not discriminating between entrees, and stuffed his face, but he decided there's always room for dessert when everything seems homemade and you can smell the stuff out in the hall, and he did a number on a couple slices of pie as well.

He went to bus his tray and he was going to toss the meal pass, but before he did he read the thing just for the heck of it . . . and *what was this*, it said *Valid*: (and then the woman Sue-Anne's handwriting) **11/3 - 11/7**.

Wow.

So, unless he was overthinking . . . he should be good eating here until Friday . . . which hopefully he wouldn't require, being here that long . . . and that would be 5 extra hours for Eva to be hanging on . . . but man, what a relief even for a *couple* days that he could keep his piddly cash reserves in his pocket and stay full.

There was a machine where you could stand there and blend your own coffees, like an imitation of something at Starbucks, and you could add the sweet flavored concoctions, and Pike figured what the heck and he whipped something up and brought it back to one of the tables.

There were three students across from him finishing up and one guy mentioned that his roommate Matt flunked out.

"What did he flunk out *from*?" one guy said.

"That's a dumb question," the first guy said. "F's."

"He meant," the third guy said, "was it too much partying? Or he didn't want to be here anyhow."

"I didn't exactly mean it that way," the second guy said, "but Matty wasn't a bad dude, he was goofy."

"Yeah," the first guy said, "truth was, I think he wanted to go to lineman school."

"Where's *that* at?" one guy said. "And what *is* it?"

The first guy was explaining it, and the other guys chiming in, all 3 of them sort of droning on now and Pike lost his focus . . . at least on that part.

What he was wondering--trying to put together real quick, since you still had the minor issue of where the heck he might be sleeping tonight--was there any way he could be the guy's new roommate?

So he waited, and the conversation turned to the three of them updating their opinions on the female population in the dorms, and finally they got off

their rear ends and headed out the cafeteria to their particular dorm which above the entry said Unit D, Worthington Hall.

Hmm. So Pike followed along, and there was an elevator and a side staircase and two guys waited for the elevator but the first guy--the one with the flunked-out roommate--took the stairs, and Pike kept his distance but did that too.

It only required the one flight, the guy being on the second floor, and Pike observed him until he went two-thirds of the way down the hall and pulled out a key and disappeared into a room on the left, which Pike identified a minute later as 12.

First thing of course, the roommate flunked out but could he still be here . . . but Pike thinking it unlikely, since this was Monday and they probably let you know on Fridays if you'd flunked out, but he could be way off.

Still . . . why screw around speculating, and he waited a few minutes and knocked on the guy's door and told him, hi, he was looking for Room 12, and the guy only opened the door a crack at first but then swung it open wider and Pike could see the roommate's side, and you had a bare mattress on the bed and nothing else indicating recent human presence.

"What do you need?" the guy said.

"Well hey, I'm Monte. Hamilton," Pike said, adjusting to the roommate really *being* gone. "They, uh, sent me here," he said.

"Oh," the guy said, taking a second to process it. "That's cool . . . *Jeff*." And they shook hands, and the guy asked if he had any *stuff*, or whatever, and Pike said it was coming from Arkansas but there was a screw-up--realizing that was a mistake, since would he now have to fake an Arkansas accent--but the guy didn't seem to care and told him make himself at home, and he'll catch him later, he's meeting his girlfriend to study. And the guy went on his phone, and he splashed on a little cologne and grabbed his laptop and a minute later was gone.

Dang.

So you might be able to get some sleep after all, and more important stay warm, since even with no bedding the heat in this place was overpowering--and

more important still, avoid spending the money (which you probably didn't have enough of) on a motel room.

At least until someone figured you out, which hopefully wouldn't happen for a day or two. The only issue now, really, was how do get in the room. Meaning when the guy Jeff is gone, and even when he's here, you have to at least demonstrate you have a key.

Pike took a look outside the window anyway, could you climb in, since you weren't very high. There was a thick pipe attached to the yellow brick outside of the building, and yeah, admittedly you probably could shimmy up it--and Pike knew that with his extra strength he definitely could--but that wouldn't be the right solution.

There was a stick in the garbage can on the flunked-out guy's side, the one thing the guy left behind, and it looked like a popsicle stick. It was a little disgusting to use, but Pike wedged it into the top of the door frame so the door wouldn't close all the way, and he went back downstairs trying to find someone who might give him a key.

There was an office on site, next to the rec room that had ping pong and a pool table it. It said *University Housing*, but the hours were a 9-5 type thing, and Pike did find a maintenance guy still working, but that guy didn't speak a lot of English but still conveyed to Pike that he had nothing to do with getting students into rooms.

In the far corner by the elevator Pike noticed another door, that looked kind of like an apartment one, which would be odd, but he asked a girl passing by and she said that was the RA.

He processed that one and didn't want to be an idiot and ask what that meant and finally figured it might be Resident Attendant or Resident Assistant . . . so he tapped on the door.

A guy answered, barefoot and in a Colorado Rockies t-shirt and shorts, and there was hip-hop music playing medium-loud and Pike could see into the next room a female with her legs up on the couch, working the TV changer, her not exactly bundled up in winter clothing either.

“What can I do for y’all,” the guy said, not asking it, but more implying this wasn’t a good time, unless you got a full-fledged emergency on your hands.

Pike said, “Sorry to intrude. They sent me here--I mean not here, your apartment--but upstairs. 12. They forgot to give me a key though.”

The guy put up his hand, like hold on, and he came back with an ipad and fingered around. “Name?” the guy said.

“Mike Hemmington,” Pike said, realizing he was already mixed up on the name he gave Jeff.

The RA guy scrunched his face and tried clicking on something else and said no, you’re not in the system.

“Oh boy,” Pike said. “Well the office, they set me up okay. All’s I need, the only reason I’m bothering you--would you have an extra key. Just overnight, until I can straighten it out.”

The guy let out an exhale, like he didn’t need this, and you could see him glance at the female on the couch . . . and he put up his hand again and came back with one, and before he handed it over he delivered a little lecture, that this here’s the *Master*, so I’m trusting you with it this once, and be sure to see me in the morning when you’ve straightened it out.

Pike said that he completely understood, and again, sorry to intrude, and he went back upstairs and tried it and everything was cool . . . and you had some time, the night was still young, and you might as well take a look around campus for some action, just like a regular college student.

Chapter 7

Cotter High School was one of the 2 that weren't in Pocatello proper, and it was up on a hill, and the neighborhood felt pretty newly developed, as did the school, which had some architecturally stylish metal and glass to it, and the landscaping was simple and clean and tasteful.

There was no script for how you'd pull something like this off. Pike lied there in bed last night tossing around the possibilities--the new roommate, Jeff, snoring away like a freight train--and he decided you better try to *infiltrate* the situation, that'd be your best shot.

So he arrived at Cotter promptly at 7:45 in the morning, which unfortunately required a \$4 Uber ride, though at least he'd managed to hit the dorm breakfast buffet first, and he said to himself *Here goes*, and he marched into the attendance office and announced that he was a new student and all set to be processed, or however it worked.

They welcomed him but they asked for all the expected documentation, and--this was getting familiar--Pike politely told them he didn't *have* any of it, that his family'd just moved here from New Hampshire this weekend, and could they square him away anyway, temporarily.

It was a man this time handling things, an older gentleman, and he said of course they could, and after Pike filled out some paperwork (where it asked for a local address he put down the Super 8) the guy took his time laminating a student ID card for Pike--who was now Miles Huffington, but what was the difference--and the guy asked about the weather in New Hampshire and how he liked this part of the country so far by comparison. Pike tried to answer as best he could, and show the guy some respect, since this was a nice man.

In fact . . . the guy's manner and voice reminded him just a bit of Mr. Goldsworthy, one of the math teachers back in Beacon, at Hamilton . . . and Pike tried to block that out, the possibility that *other* things might line up *too*, separate from the job you're trying to do.

He enrolled as a sophomore, hoping to cross paths with Dave or Eva or both or them, and he did have Dave in an English class and Eva in Biology, but there was nothing there to latch on to--no leads to direct you how to handle the darn thing.

It was of course nice to see Eva normal again. In Biology they got up and did an experiment and everyone partnered off, and it was good to hear her normal energetic voice as she conversed with her lab partner.

Dave, what could you say, he was on the other side of the room in that English class and the teacher was going on about Huckleberry Finn for the whole period and everyone was taking notes, sort of.

At lunch Pike actually made a few friends, as word had gotten around about the new kid from New Hampshire, and even a senior girl talked to him for a minute--though of course Pike *was* a senior, so not that big a deal, even though she didn't know that.

What Pike watched for at lunch was any sliver of interaction between Dave and Eva. Meaning . . . could he unbelievably be too late already, if say, Dave was wrong about them getting together in November--or worse, could they have gotten together *today*, the first class day of November.

This notion alarmed Pike, that something this basic could have slipped through the cracks. So he asked the current kid he was talking to when basketball practice starts, or started, and Pike waited nervously for the answer, and the kid unfortunately took a minute coming up with it, finally telling you he got cut from JV's, so Pike could see why it was a sore subject, but the kid added that official practice started yesterday.

Pike did distinctly remember Dave saying they met, he and Eva, a little ways into practice . . . that's how Dave was time-placing it.

So, that was a slight relief, and combined with the fact that Pike didn't pick up any interaction between Dave and Eva in the cafeteria or lunch quad--you should be okay there.

In fact, what you did notice at lunch, at one of the picnic tables all by themselves, was Dave and another girl . . . and if they didn't look pretty dang hot and heavy with each other, you could have fooled Pike.

So one more concern--was this even the right year--could Dave have mixed up back at the hospital from the stress--and all that other second-guessing garbage that swirled around in your brain when you attempted this stuff. Pike told himself once more, don't overthink it, you've been down this road a few times already, and there are plenty of curveballs--don't lose sight of the big picture.

Plus . . . it was high school, and stuff that seemed big-time serious often fell apart quick. Likely meaning, in Dave's case, when the teacher switched the seats and he discovered Eva.

When classes ended and the 3 o'clock bell rang Pike decided his first order of business was transferring into that history class.

Unfortunately the old guy wasn't in the office this time, it was a young intern-type gal who projected plenty of attitude before you even opened your mouth. This could be tricky.

Pike said, "Hello there m'aam. Could I please request a favor. That being, switch my schedule around, just slightly?"

"What seems to be the *problem*?" the intern said. "Back-adjusting a student's program is outside of district protocol."

This gal was going to be a giant roadblock, one of those people in life who enjoyed telling you *No*. Hmm.

Pike said, "What I was getting to--and here's the thing, there's a *bigger* problem-- but I was hoping *my* problem would at least get *second* priority."

"Unh-huh," she said, "and what's the bigger problem?"

“That one? . . . Oh, the two dudes upstairs getting ready to go at it. Other kids are telling ‘em not to, but I thought I better rush down here and at least let you know.”

The woman was all business now and picked up the phone. She had a *Frank* on, who Pike assumed was a security guy, or custodian if they didn’t have a security guy on campus at the moment. “Upstairs where?” she said to Pike.

“Ah, like, in the corner . . . Of the auditorium,” he said, pointing one way and then the other, and the gal relayed that to Frank and she herself took off out the office door, and Pike called after her that it might be *around* the corner, he wasn’t sure.

What Pike was hoping, there’d be someone else more easygoing in the back office, which the door was presently closed *to* . . . and Pike wondered if he’d be out of line knocking on it, or should you just try to kind of yell back there.

He opted for the first one, and helped himself around the wooden half-gate that separated the students from the staff, and he was about to knock on that door when the older guy from this morning came out of *another* door, and Pike realized the guy was simply using the rest room and wasn’t gone for the day.

So Pike presented his case to him, and the man was happy to comply, almost delighted to in fact, and he wanted to hear all about how Pike’s first day went.

The intern gal came storming back in, but by that point Pike’s paperwork was out and being adjusted, and she gave Pike an angry stare-down and said they didn’t find any evidence of what he was talking about.

Pike actually felt bad sending her on a wild goose chase, but business was business, so to speak--he didn’t come all the way here for nothing--and the real good part, it turned out the older gentleman was her boss.

“Here we go now,” the guy said, as Pike double-checked the new schedule. “Fine and dandy?”

“Most definitely,” Pike said, and he thanked him and got out of there.

The guy had to make a few extra alterations, since high school class schedules behaved like a chain reaction--but bottom line, Pike now had Mr. Witherspoon 4th period for World History.

Next thing, which he'd been thinking about the last couple hours, why not try to get on the basketball team, you never know, maybe there was an angle where you could derail Dave that way. Pike had no idea what the angle *was*, but it couldn't hurt.

So he headed over to the gym and found the head coach, and told him his story, and the coach was receptive enough to a tryout but threw Pike off by asking if was trying out for JV or Varsity ball.

A player who had just suited up for practice was asking the coach a question now, and Pike thought about it, that if they featured Dave on the freshmen team from last year in a photo on the website, you hoped that meant he was one of the better freshmen players, and good enough to play varsity this year as a sophomore.

So Pike said varsity please, and the coach told the player to stick around for a few minutes, and they all went to the auxiliary gym, too small to play regulation games in, but fine for practice obviously.

The coach had Pike go one-on-one against the kid, and Pike's ball-handling skills weren't the greatest, and the kid kept stealing the ball before Pike could get off a shot. Then the coach had him defend the kid, and that went a little better for a while, but the kid ended up scoring on him a bunch.

It didn't take long for the coach to tell Pike that he didn't make the cut, and you couldn't blame the guy.

Pike thought of one more thing. "Coach," he said, "what about this?"

And Pike had the ball and he lined up one more time against the kid, top of the circle, and started to his left, the ball skills still shaky but keeping control this time and wheeling to the right, inside the foul line, and then taking off . . . and Boom, dunking the basketball, over the bewildered looking kid.

The coach stood there a minute. He said, “All righty then son . . . We’ll give you a suit. Not going to guarantee you any playing time. We’ll see if you develop at all. Right now your skills . . .”

“I know,” Pike said, “raw.”

“Yep,” the coach said, “but what you did just *there*, might make up some ground.”

Pike thought, what do you know, and 20 minutes later he was running line-sprints in the varsity gym in the team warm-up, and he spotted Dave, so fortunately the guy *did* make varsity, and you had one more angle. Possibly.

What Pike knew for sure, at the end of the 2 hours, was practices were tough out here in Idaho, and he was ravenous beyond belief when he got back to the dorm, and he was happy to find that tonight’s fare was even superior to, and more plentiful than, last night’s.

He went back to the room, and luckily he’d found a Lost & Found in the dorm and some clothes that fit decently, and he did a laundry. Also he still had the master key the RA gave him temporarily, which didn’t appear to be an issue, since the guy seemed plenty preoccupied last night and likely forgot about it.

The thing now--Pike couldn’t help thinking I’m all dressed up with nowhere to go. Translated to: I’m in the dang school, I’m even in the right class, I’m on the team, I found Dave and Eva and thank God they’re not together yet . . . but you engineer this . . . how?

It was 9:30 Tuesday night, and he’d arrived here Monday afternoon, so that made it . . . what . . . 31 hours and counting, since Eva took the second turn for the worse and they rushed her into surgery?

Which still converted to only an hour and a half in real time, *hospital* time, back in North Phoenix--but when you woke up tomorrow (Wednesday) you’d be closing in on 2 hours, and the way the situation had accelerated down there, you needed to *get* this one, soon.

Chapter 8

By the end of the day Wednesday Pike narrowed it down to the history class. That you needed to mess something up there so Mr. Witherspoon wouldn't switch around the seating.

The basketball part . . . all he could come up with for that was injuring Dave. Like in a scrimmage or a drill--and even today, they were going 3 on 3 and Dave was in the other group and Pike could have done something.

If you hurt him bad enough, Pike supposed, like break a leg, he wouldn't be back to school for a while, so if Mr. Witherspoon adjusted the seating, Dave might not be next to Eva at all, since he'd be on extended leave from class.

Or even if he eventually ended up in that seat after he recovered, the key moment that Dave spoke about in Arizona--the love at first sight melodrama business--might not have occurred, or at least might have played out differently.

But no. Injuring Dave wasn't the answer. Pike remembered he'd actually tried something similar with the guy in San Francisco. Whether that had worked or not, the verdict was still out--but bottom line it didn't *feel* right back then. If he were doing it again he would have tried a different approach--and it didn't feel right now, either.

Mr. Witherspoon was one of those rare energetic and interesting teachers you wished you had more of. First of all the guy was funny. At one point he was comparing two countries and he asked for a couple volunteers, and it kind of accidentally turned into a skit, like something goofy that might happen at a summer camp, and you had to give Mr. Witherspoon credit, he rolled with it and didn't try to stop it, even though it went way off the rails from his intention.

Something else he did that Pike remembered another teacher doing one time, he let you know when what he was talking about was important enough to

take notes on--indicating this stuff would be on an exam somewhere (which of course Pike wasn't worried about, and didn't take notes for)--as opposed to when he was talking about something where he *didn't* let you know it was important. So those times, which was most of the *class*, you could relax, and maybe even get a kick out of some of it--since you weren't going to be required to remember any of it.

What Pike did figure out by the end of the period was Mr. Witherspoon handled the seating the old-fashioned way, which was he seated you in alphabetical order. He had a chart on his desk. In his case it was right to left--the A's in front near the door, and the Z's, if there were any, in back on the other side of the room near the windows.

So Eva, being Jorgensen was about in the middle, halfway back, and Pike, being Huffington, was in the next row but more up front . . . and Dave (whose last night Pike knew now was Belknap--the Engle in that yearbook caption had a been a misprint) was in the first row near the door, behind the A's.

Pike figured he could get away with the question since he was new, and he asked the kid behind him if they ever changed seats--like every week . . . or month or something--and the kid said nah, he'd had Mr. Witherspoon before and this was how he worked it in the other class too. The kid said Mr. Witherspoon was an ex-marine, that he brought it up that sometimes. Pike considered it and could see some of that, yeah. Mr. Witherspoon was loose and having fun up there in front of the class, but he was also organized, and he dressed neat and looked in good shape. Not to mention he had a crew-cut.

So, if Phoenix-Dave's account of the seat-switch was accurate--and no reason to doubt it, that would be a strange thing to make up . . . then something was going to have to happen--wasn't it--to cause Mr. Witherspoon to break rank . . . or whatever you did in the Marines that violated a protocol.

4th period History fed into Lunch, and Pike filled his tray and sat by himself at the end of a long table, preoccupied.

He was thinking, *see now, this is where Mitch would come in handy*, being able to at least bounce stuff off the guy.

And this is what made these trips rough. When you stripped it all away, you were on your own.

Separately, this school wasn't bad. He wouldn't have minded going here, period, but that was getting off topic.

He supposed you could casually ask Dave--but again, taking the unknown risk of initiating contact with someone you were dealing with in the present--if there was any reason to think Mr. Witherspoon might make that change--and what that reason might *be*.

That seemed like a last resort, and most likely Dave wouldn't have an opinion on the subject anyway.

You could also, Pike was thinking, try to screw up Mr. Witherspoon *outside* of class somehow.

But how would you pull *that* off, exactly? That would take serious brain-power to even formulate, but the logic being, if Mr. Witherspoon was drawn away from school for a while--or even class--such as he had to fill in for the principal or something crazy, and therefore someone else had to take over his History class--then perhaps the new person *doesn't* change the seating around . . . and of course Dave and Eva don't connect that day.

Hmm. This was sounding way out there, and Pike finished up his lunch, not tasting much of it, and pretty dang discouraged.

There were 3 girls sitting across and a ways down the long table and Pike had absent-mindedly glanced over there a couple times, and finally there was some giggling and one of them came over.

Pike recognized the girl now, and was trying to place her but couldn't quite and she seemed a bit disappointed that he didn't remember her from History today.

"Sorry about that," he said.

"You're new and all," she said, having introduced herself as Cherise, "which I get. I was new last year too."

"Where from?" Pike said.

“Kansas City,” she said, and Pike didn’t want to look like an idiot not knowing what state it was in, thinking isn’t it on the border of Missouri and Kansas? So he changed the subject, and what the heck, why not ask about class. “Any troublemakers in there?” he said.

Cherise didn’t address that but, looking over at her girlfriends she said, “We heard about you in basketball. That sure sounded like . . . really something.”

“You gotta be kidding,” Pike said.

“Do you play football too?”

“Well I did, my last school. I was decent. Or I should say, average. But I improved my senior year.”

“I thought you’re a sophomore,” Cherise said, looking genuinely confused.

“Yeah, well,” he said, “we . . . called it something different in California. The terminology.” Pike thinking, *unreal*, I blow it twice, in one answer. What happened to New Hampshire?

She said, “Oh. How do you use *senior* differently in California?”

And ah brother. Pike said, trying to make it up as he went, “It was a formation. On the field. In freshmen football . . . When we went to *that* formation, I did better . . . You’re starting to be a pain in the neck. How about that?”

But she was smiling and at least *he* was too. There hadn’t been much of that the last couple days. Cherise said, “So we’ll see you Friday night, right?”

“What’s Friday night?”

“You don’t know? It’s the Apple Game.”

Pike was putting together a few things. The basketball coach had mentioned something about *the scrimmage Friday*, and Pike had ignored it. Because so what, it wouldn’t apply to him, he’d be on the bench--plus, forget that anyway, he was hoping for sure to be out of here before then.

Dave of course, had placed the time frame as *before the games started*, so that wouldn’t necessarily mean this week, that he and Eva got together--if this was only a practice deal and not a real game--but it *might*.

Hamilton had something similar, a scrimmage against Wilson every year the first week, and it didn't count for anything, and they played Wilson for real later, after the season started.

But Pike was registering that this warm-up-game business *out here* was a bigger deal, first if it was against Cotter's main rival school, West Mercer--and especially if they had a *name* for it. And the name included the word *Game*.

"Anyways," Cherise said, "it's good to meet you." Sort of waiting.

Pike leaned in a little closer and said, "Can I ask you something? Not for public consumption?" Cherise was turning just a bit red and said sure.

Pike knew, who was he fooling, that wouldn't work, her keeping whatever it was quiet . . . but again you're picturing Eva in Phoenix, 2 hours-plus now into her brutal situation. He said, "Is there any reason at all--that you can think of--where Mr. Witherspoon is going to change the seating arrangement?"

"Huh?" she said.

"I know. That's a weird question. I was just checking if you were paying attention."

"You're funny," she said. "But something tells me you really want to know. Why--in California you all sit wherever you want?"

Pike was thinking yeah, some classes we do, but that was beside the point.

He said, "Are there like, 2 kids that don't get along? Sitting next to each other?" He'd actually watched for that today but didn't notice anything.

"Sure," she said, "there's Gene and Jorge."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"No reason. But, they were there today? . . . and, they normally sit near each other?"

"Yes they do. Gene is not a nice person . . . I mean I take that back, he *was* nicer last year. Anyways, he's been on suspension."

If you had to guess you'd say Cherise had a little interest in this Gene, but whatever. Pike said, "And when does he, like come off suspension? Any idea?"

Cherise was on top of it. “Well he got suspended Thursday. Ours are a week.” Gee, *ours*, she really *was* familiar with this. Pike flashed on his *own* couple of them at Hamilton, they were shorter. Little stricter out here.

But . . . this was starting to maybe shape up, wasn't it?

Gene comes back from suspension, gets into it again with Jorge, disrupting class. Mr. Witherspoon, who has been enjoying a peaceful week without conflict, decides enough is enough with this crap--and switches everyone's seats around, to at least stick Gene and Jorge in opposite ends of the room.

And of course *Thursday* being *tomorrow*. So if everyone came to class on Friday and got new seating assignments, that would still put it before the *games* started . . . wouldn't it.

Or even, Pike was thinking now, a bit more alarmed with the impending time frame--Mr. Witherspoon could say heck with this--and on Thursday itself, tomorrow--right when Gene and Jorge act out again--not fool around and switch the whole shebang up right then.

Cherise was still hovering, watching Pike go through his chain of thought. When he seemed to be re-focused, she said, “Anyhow. We just wanted to say hi. And let you know, we'll be there Friday night.”

The way she was carrying on about that, it was likely word got around of Pike dunking on the kid in the tryout. Which was kind of amusing, since Pike really was not very good at the sport. But when a 6-foot, white, high school guy dunks the ball, he supposed it tended to liven up the conversation a little bit.

Chapter 9

Pike came up with a plan--admittedly a shaky one--but at 3 when the bell rang instead of heading to basketball practice he paid another visit to the office.

Fortunately there was no sign of the drill-sergeant intern gal, and the older gentleman was there, and he said to Pike, "I must say young man, we're seeing quite a bit of you so far. Not that we mind. But what can I do for you *this* time?"

Pike wasn't *sure* of the plan, and scanned the office to get a handle on it. He said, "I got to thinking, sir, after yesterday, where it looked like you were training someone . . . Could you do that for me too? I mean . . . could I help out around here?"

The gentleman chuckled. "Now that's not any everyday student request."

"Oh," Pike said, "What *are* some?"

"It doesn't matter," the guy said. "Vivian, from yesterday, mind you--she has a part-time paid position with us."

"Well she's good at it," Pike lied. "But how about it? Is there anything you can give me, keep me busy a couple hours a week . . . like filing or something?"

Pike didn't know what filing was exactly. He heard his mom use the expression a few times, when she was taking temp jobs when he was a kid, so he assumed it was typical office work.

The older guy scratched his head, not because he was thinking that hard, but probably because something itched. He said, "Well, if you *insist* . . . I suppose we could use some help with year-end fundraiser."

"What," Pike said, "the school doesn't have enough money?" This was a valid question. Things seemed so well run out here, compared to California. The school was immaculate, inside and out, the basketball practice uniform they

gave him was brand new, and if the couple experiments they did so far in Biology were any indication, there was no shortage of high-quality supplies.

“We do and we don’t,” the gentleman said, and Pike figured you better leave it at that, before the guy forgets he’s going to give him something to do.

A few minutes later Pike was squared away at a computer behind the main counter, and yeah, the annual fund-raiser business was a huge deal . . . it wasn’t just a Saturday night event, or a phone-a-thon, it went on in some form for the last two weeks of the semester, and it included events organized in town as well.

So what the gentleman needed Pike to help with--and by now Pike was calling him Mr. Canby--was thin out and then merge a bunch of databases together, of all past alumni going back 40 years--and Pike learned that this was the *new* Cotter High School location, but there’d been an original one on Clark Street before that, the other side of the railroad yard. Mr. Canby in fact was explaining that the old school building is still there, but it’s been broken up into different operations, and the old auto shop wing is now a boat repair place.

It was clear the guy loved to talk about the school history, and it *was* interesting--but you had a job to do so Pike faked listening and faked looking around the databases, and got right down to it.

Luckily Mr. Canby was on the counter side of the computer and couldn’t see the screen. It didn’t take long to come up with Mr. Witherspoon’s email address.

After a few minutes Mr. Canby went to help someone who popped into the office, and then he was busy with some other stuff, and Pike began composing the email. It took a few stops and starts and adjustments, and he had to try to remember all the rules of grammar that he’d conveniently forgotten, but the finished draft read:

Memo to Faculty

From: The Administration

Dated: Wednesday November 5th, 2014

Dear Faculty Members,

Please be advised that due to a breakdown of Microsoft Capability in our Cotter internal computer network, we ask that all class seating arrangements be permanent for the duration of the semester.

Please know that we are aware of and will be addressing the issue in time for the winter/spring term.

We apologize for any inconvenience and we thank you for your continued dedication to Cotter High School.

Hmm. Pike was thinking, if there's a bigger bunch of BS floating around in the state of Idaho today he'd like to see it . . . but meanwhile, he entered *one* email address at the top of the message--Mr. Witherspoon's--thought about it for another second, and then boom, hit **Send**.

At this point he thought could hustle over to basketball practice, and be late, but at least show up and not be totally in the doghouse. But Mr. Canby was such a nice guy that you wanted to show him the respect of doing what you said, so Pike spent another hour-and-a-half trying to actually *sort* the alumni databases by category, and it was more complicated than you would think.

Mr. Canby offered him a ride, and Pike said sure, and then remembered he was supposed to be living in the Super 8, so he had Mr. Canby drop him there, which was closer to the college campus than Cotter High School was but still a trek, but the timing was good when Pike made it there, meaning the dinner cafeteria was in full swing and he was starved . . . and of course his one-week pass hadn't expired yet so the price was still right, and for good measure he took some extra food back to the room.

Tonight a lot of doors were open as he headed down the hall. It turned out Wednesday was the unofficial social night on campus and people floated around. When he got to his room, *his* door was open too, and his roommate--Jeff--was mingling in there with about 6 other people, which included some righteously attractive females.

Pike figured why not insert yourself in the mix, that-- nothing personal-- but this could be a *lot* more interesting than talking to that sophomore girl today at lunch.

Chapter 10

One reason these travel experiences kept you off balance was because sometimes things didn't play out even remotely close to how you anticipated--while other times, it was like everything was right on cue.

Thursday was one of those. Nothing abnormal the first three periods (only that Pike was a little tired, on account of the Wednesday night dorm social activities lasting a bit late, but that was fine).

In 4th period History, yep, you had Gene back from suspension, kind of a sleazy looking kid who if you had to guess, was the instigator in the apparently ongoing disagreement between himself and Jorge.

Gene said something to Jorge right away when he sat down, and Pike couldn't quite hear what it was, but it didn't matter--and Jorge was clearly one of those kids who wasn't going to back down, and said something back.

Plenty of edge to both comments.

Mr. Witherspoon cleared his throat, staring at them both, and said for everyone to please open the textbook to page 116.

This lasted for about 30 seconds, until Gene said something to Jorge again.

You felt bad for Mr. Witherspoon. In the old days, the way Pike understood it, teachers had more control because they could get a bit physical with kids if they needed to. We're not talking beat-up anyone, but Pike could picture a Mr. Witherspoon, *in* the old days--and as an ex-Marine too--taking a moment to calmly walk over to Gene and then grab him by the jacket and run his sorry rear end out into the hallway and tell him to not move the rest of the period. Or else.

And the Genes of the world probably would stay there, and be afraid to move. They'd respect that.

Now of course everything was different. The students had all the rights and the teachers had to fit the obnoxious kids into the mix. The best a Mr. Witherspoon could do these days--which Pike hated to admit--was shuffle seats around to separate people.

Meanwhile, he prayed that a) Mr. Witherspoon even saw the email and b) that he took it seriously.

A minute later Gene popped off for the third time, and Pike couldn't help himself. He said, pretty loud, "Yo, dude. Shut UP."

Gene whipped around to see who *this* was, and Pike was a couple rows over and part-way back, and Gene started to get up, and Mr. Witherspoon to his credit did get in Gene's face slightly, and told him it's in his best interest to sit back down.

Then he pointed to Pike as well, and told him that outburst was unacceptable.

The rest of the class was into it by this point and they seemed let down when the tension did subside and they had to follow in the textbook again, and the rest of the period shifted back to normal.

Pike had experienced enough Genes to not be surprised to have the guy challenge him after class, and that's what happened, outside in the hall the doofus saying, "Hey Punk, I'm *talking* to you," and so on, and Pike walked away without making eye contact, hoping he wasn't about to get clocked on the head from behind. Fortunately Gene must have found other interests--or targets--the rest of the day, and Pike didn't have to interact with him further.

The big picture, it was conceivable that Mr. Witherspoon *might* have changed the seating right then, when Gene first mouthed off. Pike could understand this. You have an idiot gone for a week and you can actually *teach*, and then 2 minutes in, with the guy back, it goes south again.

Either that, or Mr. Witherspoon could have come into class tomorrow--and still might--with a revised cheating chart and move everyone *then*.

Pike's instinct was the first one, that the teacher was exasperated and not going to fool around. Which is why he blurted out to the kid to shut up, as a back-up, in case the email wasn't going to work.

Anyhow . . . if something *was* going to happen, at least one way or the other it was averted. For now.

The coach did take a jab at Pike and another kid who was absent yesterday, at basketball practice. He said in tomorrow night's game--and now he too, had upped the language from scrimmage to *game*--the two of them would be last off the bench--if they got in the game at all.

Pike knew this drill from football. Coaches wanted to make an example out of you. He also couldn't fault them--it *wasn't* fair to a kid who'd been showing up all week to have you get into a game ahead of him.

One good thing, this kid Morrison from basketball had given him a couple rides home (not exactly home, but dropping him on 4th and Center which was close) and was again tonight, and with Uber trips and snacks and a few odds and ends Pike's finances were getting real dicey, a grand total of \$18 left, so every ride helped.

Thursday nights in the dorms were study night, as contrasted with Wednesday, which did get a little wild, though Pike was pretty sure the study part was overrated. But admittedly his dorm was pretty low key tonight, so you never know.

Jeff wasn't there and Pike stretched out on the bed. He was wondering if he could chance it, and try to return to Phoenix *tonight*. Possibly--with a lot of luck--his job was over. And what we did have, with the Eva clock ticking away . . . Pike used his fingers . . . 3 and a half hours and counting. Tomorrow was Friday, and that would make it 4.

It *was* tempting to get the heck out of here, but you better make sure.

Chapter 11

Which was ridiculous, because that's not how it works, nothing is even *close* to sure.

And at some point he'd have to read the **10 Rules** more carefully--*really* read them this time, try to absorb the subtle stuff they were telling you, that was under the surface.

But not now.

Pike's day Friday--his entire focus--centered around 4th period. If Mr. Witherspoon didn't change the seating today, you had to feel decent--not in the clear but decent--about Dave and Eva not meeting the way Dave related it. If they *did* happen to get together later, then God Bless 'em . . . but then you'd hoped things would be altered just enough so they wouldn't have been on I-15 at the right moment that day two years later to pick him up hitchhiking when they were cutting a half-day of school and heading to the mall in Salt Lake . . . And he never would have met them, and Eva wouldn't be fighting for her life right now.

Pike thought about confronting George before class, meaning hustle and get there first, and wait outside the door, and when he shows up put your toughest face on and tell him he better behave himself today.

The problem obviously, this could backfire and typically did. When you told someone *not* to do it--especially a *jerk*--someone, that made them inclined to do it more.

So all Pike could do was sweat it out in class, at the mercy of what might transpire.

Class began and Gene and Jorge were both there and yes there was some trash talk between them but so far it wasn't real loud or over the top, and Mr.

Witherspoon pulled down a map of South America from the frame of the blackboard and started using a long pointer and talking.

This was an encouraging sign, that he didn't *begin* class with a new seat chart. Now all you had to do was make sure he wasn't saving it up to spring on you later in the period.

Then, the fire alarm went off, and this seemed like a real fortuitous break, Pike thinking of how they have you stand around in front of the school during fire drills and they test out their procedures or whatever . . . and it can often eat up a period.

But it turned out it was a false alarm--the custodian was doing something and he triggered one of them, and 5 minutes after vacating the classroom, they were back.

There was a half hour left . . . but then a minute later Pike noticed, how could he have missed it, that Gene didn't come back after the fake fire drill.

Hmm . . . Wow. So that guy wouldn't be *triggering* anything at least . . . So now the only concern left, you prayed that Mr. Witherspoon didn't have that plan to change the seating *anyway*, before the end of class . . . and Pike watched the clock tick down, and with 15 minutes left he raised his hand and started asking questions about South America.

Pike didn't know much about South America--he hadn't paid enough attention when his *own* sophomore history class had studied it--but he winged it well enough to keep Mr. Witherspoon busy. When the teacher finished answering one question, Pike fired off another, and finally, *mercifully*, the bell rang and 4th period History was done for the week.

It may have been Pike's imagination but when they were filing out into the hall after the bell, he thought Dave was looking at him funny--and then he noticed Eva maybe doing the same thing--and yeah, the mind can play funny tricks . . . but you never know.

At this point he was pretty dang confident that he really *could* take off right now. That would of course require a starting point, but he'd done it before from Pocatello--he'd just have to remind himself from where . . . He was putting

it together now, there was a snow melt runoff operation, a city deal, up in the hills above the Super 8, and there were some old structures up there. Maybe the snow and ice this late in the season would be an issue, but you'd figure it out. One thing for sure, *plenty* up this way was a heck of a lot older and more workable than almost anything in Phoenix.

But, Pike was also thinking . . . maybe stick around to the end of the day--and what the heck, go to the game, the Apple thing. See what the big deal was.

He was on the team after all--sort of. Unlikely he'd get inserted into it, he was basically the last man on the bench at this point--but all in all this had been a heckuva week so you might as well finish it off.

The only concern might be the post-game launch point, since it would be dark and hard to find the watershed tunnel he was picturing on that hillside. Worst scenario though, you spend another night in the dorm, it wouldn't kill you.

So he showed up at 5:30 as required, an hour and a half before tip-off, and by 6:15 it was apparent this was a pretty big deal. You had a couple buses arriving from the other school, West Mercer, and from the locker room you could hear the stands upstairs in the main gym starting to rock, and Pike was wondering if our stands at Hamilton *ever* rocked this much period, *during* a game.

When the teams hit the floor for the warm-up, 15 minutes to go, both sides of the gym were packed. You had a PA announcer building up the drama, and not only full cheerleader squads for both schools but dance teams as well.

Honestly, this little scrimmage deal, that the coach downplayed most of the week--the atmosphere felt like a state playoff basketball game in California.

The game started and Pike had a chance to size up his own teammates, which he really hadn't paid a lot of attention to in practice--who the skill players were. There was a kid Malcom, a skinny forward who was pretty smooth, and another kid Jake, who surprised Pike by pouring in a couple of 3-pointers in the first few minutes, and Cotter took the early lead. Dave got in the game toward

the end of the end of the 1st half, and he wasn't bad, and you could tell that by his senior year he'd be one of the stars.

Halftime activities for both schools were thunderously loud, with both student bodies extremely passionate, and the stage was set for the second half.

Unfortunately Cotter fell apart a bit, and this one kid Hoak for West Mercer was starting to dominate whoever defended him, and he was racking up the points, and there was another kid doing some damage too, and you could see that West Mercer had the stronger team this year.

With under 5 minutes to go, Cotter was down by 18 points, and Pike's coach looked down his way and told him and the last few other kids on the bench to get up, that they were going in.

This was called garbage time, where a team was either too far ahead or too far behind for anything to change, and the substitutes got a chance to get out there and run around.

Normally both teams handled it that way, but for whatever reason West Mercer left their starting players in the game--and right away Pike found himself dealing with the Hoak kid, the best player, and half-way up the court someone throws it to Pike and just like that Hoak steals it and casually drives the other way and scores.

This would have been okay--not that Pike was happy about it--but realistically, Pike wasn't anywhere in the guy's league in terms of ability, so these things happen, what could you do.

The thing being though, Hoak added onto the play by trash-talking Pike on the way back to the other end. Pike didn't want to repeat or dwell on what the guy said, but it was pretty dang nasty stuff. And Gee, your team's ahead by 20 now, you have to rub it in?

Unfortunately it happened again pretty quick, a Cotter guy getting double-teamed in the lane and feeding the ball back outside to Pike, and Pike hesitated a little too long before putting up a shot--and the shot never did go up, because here came Hoak blocking it, picking up the loose ball, and again going the length of the floor to score unchallenged.

This time on the way back Hoak brought one of Pike's family members into it. Adding that juicy morsel to the trash-talk mix.

Pike was not a happy individual at that point.

With just under a minute to go, Pike got the ball one more time. He was between the mid-court circle and the top of the key.

35 feet from the basket.

Hoak was guarding him, the guy flashing a wicked smile as he waited for Pike to get clumsy again with the ball, and grab it.

This time Pike kept the ball on his back side, protected it better, and another guy set a pick, meaning tried to get in Hoak's way so Pike could maneuver, and Pike started his dribble . . . but Hoak easily collapsed the pick and was right back in Pike's face . . . except Pike had just a little forward momentum now, plus some incentive . . .

And he figured, if you're going to *go* for it you might as well *really* cut it loose . . . and he wheeled toward the key, took one monster step toward the foul line and elevated . . .

And everything slowed down, and you couldn't hear the crowd, and all you could see was one of the referees standing on the baseline looking up with a whistle in his mouth . . . and then Hoak came into view, going up with Pike, making contact with him, trying to shut down whatever Pike had in mind . . .

And Pike soared toward the hoop and gritted his teeth and unleashed a savage, monumental, slam-dunk of the basketball, the force of which shattered the glass backboard into a thousand tiny pieces.

For good measure, when Pike descended he landed on Hoak, who was sprawled out, not looking all that great.

The eerie part, the whole gym had gone completely silent.

Pike was kind of *with* them on that, he hadn't expected that outcome either. Sure, he was hoping to dunk it on the kid, but the backboard exploding part--that was admittedly a surprise.

And maybe just a bit unnerving and unwise, with the evening's festivities having been slammed to an abrupt halt--to be standing there now as the center of attention.

A couple players were bending over Hoak asking if he was okay, and a coach came out, and the kid did seem all right--but meanwhile it also seemed like a prudent time to get out of there, with the guy getting up now and being helped off, and before the focus shifted back to Pike . . . and there was a series of exit doors behind the baseline and Pike picked one of them and barreled out into the night.

Chapter 12

The first thing you were happy to experience, back on the front end, Arizona, was the 50 or so degree difference in temperature.

Pike had aimed to conclude the round trip at the starting point, the old school cellar--even though he hadn't wanted to, it seemed wise to direct your focus there--but he ended up arriving around the side of the first building--the old church--and when he got his bearings he noticed the homeless guy wasn't there.

It was sure nice to have your phone working for the first time in 5 days, and it was coming up on 6pm here. Tuesday. December 27th.

Always a major relief to establish that that stuff lined up right.

What Pike had done *was* go back to the dorm for the one more night, no reason to go nuts after the game trying to find an acceptable venue. In fact he'd jogged to the dorm directly from the game. He was warmed up, that's for sure, and the adrenaline was still flowing, and he didn't even think about it, before he knew it he was in hallway headed to his room.

And one more social night, at the college level--what could it hurt? Especially being a Friday.

Except for . . . one *real* pain in the neck he hadn't thought of, was he had to get *back* to school to pick up his clothes, but especially his wallet . . . so there was 8 more bucks down the drain for an Uber, with the guy nice enough to wait . . . and the school was quiet, it was two hours after the game but Pike was confident there'd be a custodian around, and there was, and he was able to get in the locker room and grab his stuff.

Back in the dorms again, it was pretty quiet until about 11:30, and then there was some knocking on doors and a bunch of his fellow students were going

out to a club, or bar, and Pike wasn't sure of the drinking age out here but either way he wasn't going to produce any ID, that's for sure, but they all got right in and it was one of those deals where the age groups were divided but everyone was under one roof. There was a DJ and some dancing and then the late local news came on, on a couple of big-screen overhead TV's . . . and this was unfortunately during a break for the DJ and you could hear the TV's loud and clear . . . and wouldn't you know, the sports report, they led off with Pike's novelty effort at the end of the game.

The worst part, there was a video, but thank God it was a poor-quality one, clearly off someone's phone and the person not holding it that steady, and you couldn't make out Pike very well.

There were a lot of oohs and ahs in the club though when the backboard imploded, from those who had looked up enough to be paying attention, and Pike tried to make himself less visible, if that was possible. One good thing, in the dorm he was *Monte*, while at school and being named by the sportscaster at the end of the report, he was Miles . . . and the last names were close but didn't match up either, so you hoped no one in the dorm put anything together . . . and pretty quick the news was done and the action was back to normal, and the subject never came up the rest of the night.

The watershed tunnel Saturday morning above the Super 8 was pretty darn wet, and ice cold, but rather than screw around trying to find something better Pike accepted it and got his feet soaked and most of his legs up to his knees too, but the transition worked, and here he was . . . about to check in with Jack Hannamaker. Or Mitch. Or whoever answered their phone.

He tried Jack first, and as the phone started ringing Pike seized on something he hadn't thought of, and he started freaking out.

What he wasn't sure of--suddenly--was did you need to come all the way *back* in these deals--complete your *round trip*--for any changes you made to take hold?

Whooooo.

He thought back to his other examples. Unless he was blanking out on something obvious, the answer was . . . he wasn't sure.

He couldn't think of another situation where the time on the front end had been ticking down with an urgent, imperative intensity.

Had he ever clarified . . . let's say the Milburns . . . when he traveled to Chico and engineered the groundwork for them never moving to Beacon--did that mean they weren't then going to move to Beacon no matter what?

Say for example, he, Pike, never *left* 1990's Chico--hypothetically. Was the Milburns' adjustment complete, regardless of if-and-when *he* returned to the present?

Dang. He couldn't help thinking of an example in a class somewhere, where the teacher threw it out there--that if a tree falls in the forest in the middle of the night, and there's no one around to hear it, did it actually make any noise then?

It wasn't a perfect comparison--but the bottom line now: by fooling around up there after the game, and spending the extra night in the dorm . . . which was roughly what, 15 hours extra--translated in real hospital time to about 40 minutes . . .

Could the unthinkable have happened? That the 40 minutes was enough extra time for a massive infection to escalate, and Eva not to make it?

And therefore, as Pike speculated could be the case, the situation would be irreversible?

Jack's phone went to voice mail, and Pike tried Mitch, and the same deal there, and where *was* everyone, this was getting scarier by the moment . You could text one of them but Pike had to know right now, and fortunately he had Lucy's number, so he tried that.

"Hello, my friend," Lucy was saying. Pike could hear what sounded like swimming pool splashing going on in the background.

He said, "Is there, do we have, like anyone in trouble? . . . If you know what I mean?"

“Pike honey I have no idea what you mean. I don’t mean to pry, did something go wrong at the zoo? I have to say, you don’t sound like yourself.”

Pike so no, nothing went wrong at the zoo, and he thanked her and got off. You could almost take a deep breath but not quite.

But when Jack thank God got back to him a minute later, it *was* clear that it was just Jack, Andrea and this girl Heidi in the mix, who Pike apparently met at the water park the day before--no Daves or Evas in the conversation . . . but more important to Jack was, where the heck did he disappear to, they came out of the hamburger place and they couldn’t find him.

It took a moment for Pike to put it together, and then get his composure . . . and now you could legitimately take that confident deep breath . . .

Whoaaaaa boy . . .

“*Which* hamburger place?” Pike said.

“Come on Bud,” Jack said, “don’t mess with us, today’s not the right time to be joking around.”

Or maybe *not*, with the deep breath. Holy *Toledo*.

“*What*, today?” he said, “what are you *talking* about?”

“Dude, are you catatonic or some shit? *Andrea*. Obviously.”

And Pike had to sweat this one out, getting to the bottom of it while pretending to be someone who was there--as opposed to someone who just arrived from Mars . . . and the gist of it was: there was an old-fashioned steam train ride at the zoo, and they were on these miniature open-air cars with bench seats, and an extra person got in Andrea’s car, which squeezed her shoulder slightly over the outside edge, and coming around a turn she clipped one of those mini railroad crossing signs. One of the black-and-white jobs with crisscross on it.

All Pike could do was tell Jack he’d call him back.

He thought about it carefully, and tried to relate this potentially terrible development to the **10 Rules**.

Then he thought, you know what? This may have been what was *supposed* to happen though, wasn't it?

Before Dave and Eva entered the picture.

And something told him everything was going to be okay, other than everyone dealing with a little stress today . . . and he called Jack back and asked how Andrea was doing at the moment . . . and Jack gave him the silent treatment, as in how could he not *know* . . . but finally Pike indirectly got it clear, that they'd run her to a hospital for x-rays and had to wait forever but they were negative, and she was feeling mostly fine, other than popping a few aspirin.

Pike didn't want to truly alarm Jack that he'd lost his mind by asking where the burger place was, and where were they now, exactly . . . and he suggested they meet at Pancho's Taqueria in downtown Scottsdale, since he remembered seeing that place and knew it existed . . . and Jack said *whatever*, except they just ate, and Pike said so, we can eat *again*--which might not apply to Jack or the others but it definitely applied to Pike, he could eat a moose.

Chapter 13

One interesting discovery Pike made while the four of them were sitting around a table at Pancho's Taqueria, Pike doing the bulk of the food-consuming--and thinking separately that they really could use a place like this in Beacon--was Heidi was not a college freshman anymore, as Heather had been, but a sophomore.

Pike assumed he'd given her the same line at whatever water park it was where they met, a bit different of course than the skate rink where he met Heather but hopefully not *that* different--meaning, did he at least tell her he was a freshman at Fresno State--as opposed obviously to a high school kid?

Jack and Andrea were occupied across the table discussing something and Pike said to Heidi, "So. Quite a day so far, eh?"

"It *has* been. I was really *worried* when we couldn't find you."

Jeez. Where did *this* come from? He figured he'd known her for not even 2 days . . . if, let's see, he met her (the Heather version) the day after Christmas, the night of the 26th when they started at the dance place and advanced to the winter carnival deal . . .

So, the middle of the night Eva has the emergency issue, and half way through *that* day, early afternoon, he takes off for Idaho . . . then you factor in the days in road time versus hours in real time, make that adjustment, and yeah, a little hard to process--but you've known her less than one day total.

So where did the *not even 2 days* come from, it was half that long at the most. This wasn't the first time Pike got confused when he returned from somewhere--it was a royal pain to keep it all clear . . . especially when one or more of the principle players were different . . . and so far, one line out of her mouth, Pike was down with Heidi replacing Heather.

Pike said, "Sorry about that, but thanks for your concern."

"You're welcome," Heidi said, Pike maybe imagining it but it felt like she was sliding a little closer in the booth. Holy Smokes.

He said, "*Your* deal again though? With school?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean tell me again."

"You don't remember?" she said.

Ooh boy. "I do . . . but I like to hear you talk about it." He touched her hand, as sort of a joke, but maybe a test too, and she was okay with it.

"Welp," she said, "like I told you, we go back on the 16th. Same as you. That shouldn't be all that interesting." She said it playfully.

Pike was wondering same as me *where*, but the probably-good part, high schools went back earlier, didn't they, after Christmas break, so he probably *is* in college . . . according to her.

But why beat around the bush, so Pike said, "And you go . . . to ASU, right? And let's see if you remember where *I* go . . . so tell me again."

Heidi rolled her eyes but inched just a little closer and smiled and said, "I go to U of A, silly, not ASU. And *you* mister, you go to San Mateo State, you said."

Oh. The U of A part--which he assumed was the University of Arizona in Tuscon, a few hundred miles from here, so not in town like ASU was, but not radically different . . . but dang it, the San Mateo *State* part, where did that come from? If she pursued that further, like googled it in about 5 seconds, that wouldn't hold up. Pike was pretty sure there was a *junior* college in San Mateo, but a 4-year state college where you lived there and the whole shebang? No way. Why would he have blurted that out at the water park?

But you might as well keep going, get it straight. "So I'm, like . . . what year *am* in up there anyway?" The up part not making much sense, other than San Mateo was up in the Bay Area, north of Beacon.

Heidi shook her head this time and studied Pike for a moment. "You're goofy. But I'll fill you in anyway. You are a freshman . . . But I'll be honest, this is

getting strange. I mean you told me all those stories about your roommate, and when his brothers came to visit . . . They were entertaining, you had me going there.”

Pike didn't know what *going* meant, whether she's saying he faked her out somehow, or had her laughing, or whatever else, but if you were going to ask any more questions out of left field they better be real important.

So Pike left it at that, absorbing what she told him, so he could keep his own story straight if things came up again. He didn't press the issue, what year she was in, but she volunteered something a few minutes later, that she started off in pre-nursing but switched this year to sociology.

So there you had it, she was at least in her second year, didn't seem to fit being a junior yet, so Pike chalked it up as fact--meaning he was a high school senior dating (not there yet but who knows) a college sophomore.

This was always good, the direction you wanted to go, and he thought of Jack that time, getting along with someone who went to the local JC. That didn't end great of course, but Pike had to admire the guy for pulling it off, even though you didn't admit that to Jack.

Meanwhile in the taqueria Jack and Andrea ended their little discussion and were back in the mix, and Jack said, “What now guys? Seeing as how this is our last night down here.”

“Now how's that,” Pike said, wondering, was this all haywire, and did he even drive Jack down here this time? He'd have to check with Mitch, make sure for one thing that his pickup was still sitting up in the visitor parking lot at Mitch's place in Anthem. Taking it a step further, how did Jack and Andrea get *down* here tonight?

Pike told himself to relax and and try to go with the flow, that what you think might be different on these returns is not that big a deal . . . and Jack said he and Andrea were flying back to California in the morning, that Mitch had generously forked over some frequent flier miles and it wasn't costing them anything.

“The other thing being then, Bud,” Jack said, “you don’t mind driving back solo do you? My truck?”

“Huh?” Pike said.

“Yeah,” Jack said. “They called me from work. Christmas vacation, they got people out. It’s all overtime juice so I want to take advantage. Flying’ll give me an extra couple days. You know how it is, we can all use the extra cash.”

No, Pike *didn’t* know how it was. Jack had barely worked a day in his *life*, that Pike could remember--not that *he* had either. Jeez. This version of the guy was enterprising, you had to give him that.

But the truck part now? What was *that*? Again Pike reminded himself to let it play out, don’t have a heart attack here . . . and they decided to go go-karting, there was a place near ASU, the cars and the track all cutting-edge, and Pike had to admit it was good to finish off the week--if that’s how you characterized it--with some old fashioned fun.

Chapter 14

The confusing part extended to Mitch as well, what he might or might not know--and back at Mitch's apartment that night Pike learned pretty quick that Mitch didn't know much, and when Pike had a minute alone with the guy he informed him simply that he'd addressed a problem, and we should be good now.

"Addressed it . . .?" Mitch said.

"*You* know," Pike said.

Mitch didn't move for a minute. "Please tell me about it," he said, in what was becoming a replay of a few other times, Mitch putting on the dramatic, slightly raspy voice and wanting to hear every last micro-detail.

And of course the obvious irony, Mitch helped him organize what he just *did* . . . but that's how it worked.

"It's not important," Pike said. "If I gave you all the melodrama, I'd be wasting an hour and you might ask what else?"

"You're implying I might not be impressed. How could you think that, son?"

"There *was* one thing you might get a kick out of," Pike said. "Nothing to do with my *mission* back there." Pike wasn't crazy about that word but fine, it was accurate enough. "On my way home--not *quite* technically, but finishing-up there--I got into a situation. I ended up smashing one of those gymnasium backboards."

Mitch's eyes got bigger. "A . . . see-through one, are you saying?"

"Yeah. That was it for the thing unfortunately. Not sure how the game was going to continue--if it needed to--but it really didn't by that point."

“Wow . . . unreal . . . we’re talking . . . like Daryl Dawkins that time? The 76ers?”

Pike had no idea. He did know the Philadelphia 76ers were a pro basketball team, that was about it. Maybe at some point you look up Daryl Dawkins. Not important at the moment.

“At any rate,” Pike said, “I can check something off. That I didn’t plan to be *on* a list. But you move on.”

“Which reminds me,” Mitch said. “Two reports came through the last couple weeks. The website. One, a man in Little Rock, young guy--not as young as you but in the ballpark--there was a rockslide and he stopped a boulder . . . At least that’s what was reported.”

Pike hated hearing about any *new* case that could potentially be linked to him. Dani, and the few other probables that he’d run into or heard about were more than enough. The last thing he wanted, was this to turn into some sort of wack-o support group.

Ooh. The support group part, that got him flashing *on* Dani unfortunately and her connection to the New York officer’s sister--if he had it straight. You prayed there were no updates there, but now that it was on your radar, you kind of needed to make sure.

“The second,” Mitch was saying, “is an 87-year-old woman in Alaska, if you can believe it.”

Pike said, “You can’t be serious. But go ahead, the suspense is killing me.”

“There was a stick-up in a Walmart and don’t ask me how she got ahold of it, but she bent a gun, a revolver . . . You remember, like in the old comic books, the good guy with the super powers might do something like that?”

This made Pike cringe. He remembered of course doing something similar *himself* once. “Superman or Superboy,” Pike said, “take your pick.”

“Well, yes, there were those instances.”

What could he mean by *that*? Pike was questioning if *Mitch* was becoming a wack-job, and starting to mix up fact and fiction. Maybe he’d been running

that website a little too long and the obsession was creeping off the computer screen and distorting his reality.

Pike said, “Forgetting the comic books. An 87-year-old citizen in Alaska is going to, first of all, get recent cavities filled? And secondly, connect with dental material from a lab in New Mexico?”

“Certainly,” Mitch said deadpan, “on both fronts.”

Pike thought about it and fine, his argument wasn’t the greatest. And they’d been down this road before. That just because the material specifically originated . . . allegedly . . . at the old silver mine in Hillsdale, New Mexico, this didn’t preclude it from theoretically finding its way to other parts of the country and being employed accordingly. Alaska seemed far-fetched, since it was a good 4000 miles from New Mexico to up there--not to mention there was another country in the way--but obviously with air travel and technology there weren’t many roadblocks left.

Pike said, “You feed me these pieces of information . . . because?”

“I’m not sure, kid.”

And at least you had an honest answer out of the guy. Meanwhile Pike was starting to dwell on Dani’s deal--like it or not--that the New York officer who was gunned down had donated his organs (pretty sure the fellow’s name was Don) and Dani’s subsequent contact with his sister had begun to alarm her--and Mitch--and Pike himself, let’s face it.

So the timing was awkward, him having just been in her backyard, but Pike excused himself from Mitch and took a walk out to the pool area and tried Dani.

“Hey!” she said. “I kind of miss you!”

“Me too,” Pike said, not much oomph to it.

“I feel like we used to touch base more,” she said, and Pike knew what she meant, that when he put a couple of factual observations together when he was at the football recruit weekend in Logan and first found her, they sort of bonded like brother and sister for a while, since they shared this secret no one in their right mind would believe.

“Yeah,” Pike said. “Listen, cutting right to it, are we cool these days on the, you know, transplant stuff? I feel like there hasn’t been an update in a while, that front.”

“Oh.” Her tone was flatter. “I’m waiting to hear. Erline indicates we may not be. *Cool.*”

“Okay. You need to stop with the jerking me around. Honestly? That’s not a great quality of yours . . . Let me ask you straight up, plain English--has any . . . transplant recipient . . . done anything wrong. Since last time we spoke.”

“Yes they have,” she said. Pike had blocked a lot of it out, the prior details, since it was a nightmare he hoped would go away by itself, like a dangerous virus losing steam and fizzling out.

He remembered bits and pieces, that one guy went crazy at a mall for example--and least that was his recollection--and didn’t kill anyone thank God, but went off the deep end with some scary threats.

The fear, which you didn’t want to volunteer out loud, was could any of Don’s body parts have mutated when they were inserted into someone else . . . and wreaked unknown havoc?

Hard to believe that a cornea transplant for instance, if one of those happened, could trigger a reaction in the recipient’s brain and make him go berserk--you had to admit, that was the stuff of *real way out there* science fiction . . . but the reason Pike couldn’t get past it--and likely the same for Dani and Mitch--was you needed to be convinced that something like that *couldn’t* happen.

He said to Dani, “All right, you need to work with me here. Please. For our basic sanity.”

“Of course, hon,” she said.

Pike took a second, wondered do I really want to go there, open this can of worms. He said, “Then put me in touch with the sister person.”

Pike was thinking, *was* she the sister? Or was it the officer’s *wife* who Dani had been conversing with? And was this another one of those details that shifted, and did it really matter . . .

“Erline, you’re referring to,” Dani said.

“Whatever. Give me her goddang contact. I ain’t getting off the phone until that happens.” Pike rarely used the word ain’t, but he did now partly for effect but partly because he felt better doing it.

You heard Dani clicking around. “Shall I email it to you? Her information? Or read it off to you right now.”

Pike said now was best, and he wrote down what she gave him, which was a roundabout contact through Facebook. Pike asked did she have something more direct, and she said she didn’t. So you had to trust the woman and go with that.

Pike finished it off by asking how the weather was in Pocatello, and Dani said it had been unpredictable this Christmas, and hopefully global warming wasn’t kicking in. Pike didn’t want to try to comment on that, and he thanked her and said goodnight, and she said don’t be a stranger.

Mitch was whipping up a late night snack for Jack, and Andrea and Lucy too, who was there hanging out with Mitch when they got home from the go-kart place. It appeared to Pike that the two of them, Mitch and Lucy, were pretty dang cozy, but it was none of his business.

And yeah, Jack *had* driven today, into Phoenix, his own vehicle, so of course he’d driven them back to Mitch’s tonight--and Pike meanwhile confirmed as he suspected that he *didn’t* drive Jack down here in his pickup. That it was vice versa.

The amazing part, Jack now owned a Ford F-250, pretty late model, 2015. Pike didn’t need to know the details but he assumed Jack didn’t buy the thing new--but it wasn’t that used either, had 78,000 miles on it and must have set back Jack (or whoever) some serious bucks.

This was a far cry from the Jack he knew in one of the other incarnations--maybe the original one--where the guy picked up a beat up something or other on Craigslist and tried to restore it . . . and he was sort of successful except you could tell Jack didn’t trust the thing on the highway. Pike remembered it being real loud, which they did get a kick out of.

So who knows, maybe the current Jack had been industrious enough to hold part-time jobs all the way through, and saved up the old-fashion way.

Whatever. It was admittedly a lot more roomy and comfortable than Pike's truck--for one thing the shocks were all in good shape--and Pike supposed it wouldn't be that bad to drive it home.

Although . . . he kind of went for it a couple hours ago, when he was saying goodbye to Heidi, and she was heading to her aunt and uncle's house in Chandler--as opposed to Heather heading to her mom and dad's house in Glendale.

What he went for was the popping of the question, out of left field but what the heck, did she have any interest in riding with him to California.

She wasn't floored by the proposition, didn't say yes, but she said maybe.

So, that's where things were at, and Mitch was grabbing a couple potholders and pulling something baked and sweet out of the oven, and everyone was on board with it and putting out silverware and napkins, and Pike didn't know the old guy had it in him.

Chapter 15

Wednesday morning Pike dropped Hannamaker and Andrea at the airport, brief *goodbyes* and *drive carefullys* all around--after which Pike pulled out the GPS and navigated his way to Heidi's aunt and uncle's place.

What do you know, he thought.

It wasn't until a little while ago, loading up Jack's truck and doing that last look around to make sure you didn't forget anything at Mitch's place, that Heidi texted him: **sure**

Of course Pike tended to be, if not a worrier, at least an over-analyzer . . . and on the way to Chandler, fighting some long stoplights and a bit of morning traffic, he wondered if this was going to be a *be careful what you wish for* deal.

Since let's face it, Heidi may have known *him* for a day or so, but he'd known *her* for a couple hours. Nothing to hold against her based on the limited sample size--she was great, and part of him wondered why she'd be interested in *him*--but still you were holing up with someone in the front seat of a moving vehicle for two days, or one real long one, who you barely knew.

But again . . . you roll with it. You could certainly be in worse predicaments . . . and now he totally was over-thinking. Why would a rational individual label it a predicament?

Heidi was out in front with a small suitcase when Pike pulled up, and that part looked promising, a good start. Except then Heidi's uncle came out of the garage and wanted to ask Pike a few questions.

He introduced himself as Bill, and he was a big burly guy wearing Ben Davis coveralls, and his handshake was one of those knuckle crunchers, letting you know who was boss.

Bill said, “For my own edification here, just what are you’all intending to do? What’s the punch line?”

A weird way to present it but Pike knew what he was getting at, and he couldn’t blame the guy. In fact Pike admired this Bill in a way, couldn’t help wondering would his *own* dad watch out for him in this situation, if he was Heidi. Though this was getting stupid, that comparison.

Bill did hold Heidi pretty tight as he was interrogating Pike, and Pike found out from her later that her uncle and aunt had mostly raised her, since she was 8 . . . Pike didn’t ask what the circumstances were, but the bottom line, the guy was a father figure to her and was doing his job.

Pike said, “Sir, you caught me a little off guard. I’m not sure there’s *any* punch line . . . She’ll be in good hands though.”

He looked Bill straight in the eye as he said it, and there was enough conviction to it apparently that Bill didn’t require any more answers. Bill simply said, “All right then. Please let me know soon as you get there safe and sound.”

He embraced Heidi once more, and you could see the guy getting a little emotional . . . and Pike was feeling it himself for a moment as well.

That’s how you do it, he thought. If you have a daughter. You put everything into it.

Even when they’re 20 years old you’re still worried about them like they’re in kindergarten, and what was wrong with that . . . not a thing.

So here you were, and Heidi got in, and away they went (hopefully).

The first curveball happened before they got to the corner stop sign, Heidi telling Pike there was just one thing--and would he mind if they drove a friend of hers back to Tuscon first . . . Since she wouldn’t be able to now.

Pike’s geography wasn’t the greatest but he was pretty dang sure that Tuscon was south, toward Mexico, and their objective heading to Beacon would require going north.

At this point though, you don’t argue. “Not at all,” he lied. “Where do we find this person--your friend?”

“In Flagstaff,” Heidi said, as though it was around the corner. “That’s so sweet of you I can’t tell you.”

Ooh baby. Pike managed to blurt out something to the effect that it was all in a day’s work, zeroing in now that Flagstaff was over a 100 miles *north*, . . . meaning this little extra maneuver might be tacking on, Jeez, 6 or 7 hours round trip? To get back to the starting point where they are right now?

He was even thinking the 6 or 7 estimate could be a little light. Heidi’s arm resting on his shoulder did help a bit though.

So what was one more surprise . . . and traffic was light to Flagstaff, though what had you cringing a little was you went right past Mitch’s place again, the other way this time, and as they pulled off I-17 into Flagstaff Heidi informed Pike the her friend--who she referred to as her *best* friend now--was a guy, Bruce.

Wow. But Bruce got right in, all organized, gave Heidi a peck on the cheek, that was it, and it was pretty apparent that Bruce was a gay guy.

He was also a good storyteller and had an upbeat personality, and the time went by--if not quickly at least adequately--and when they finally dropped him Pike was thinking maybe he should have invited Bruce to California too, that he could saved a lot of extra driving.

Once again though Heidi laid it on. “That was so *understanding* of you,” she said.

“No big thing,” Pike said, “except are you hungry? How we doing in that department?”

“It’s very freeing to resolve Bruce,” she continued.

“Clear the decks a bit,” Pike said.

“Absolutely. And it’s wonderful that we each have two more weeks of break. I’m not a fan of being under pressure.” She’d had her arm off him for a while but put it back on.

“No, me neither,” Pike said, meanwhile well-aware unfortunately that Hamilton *didn’t* have 2 more weeks of break like the colleges did--that they’d be back in school *Monday*. You’d have to figure *something* out if Heidi was still there, which could be tricky.

Which got him thinking of another issue, basic--did Heidi think Jack and Andrea were in college too? So he asked her in a roundabout way--and at this point you certainly had plenty of time to work questions in bit by bit before you had to worry about running into the California border--and Pike hadn't gotten there yet but Heidi helped him out by asking if Jack worked every day after school.

Pike took school to mean high school, and he replied honestly that he didn't know . . . and a few other comments from Heidi the next hour clarified that yes, Jack and Andrea were high school seniors. Pike was picturing how that might have gone, them discussing it, and you did give Jack some props in these situations, and Pike could see Jack playing it cool and not bursting Pike's story of being older than he was. And Andrea of course, going along with it.

They stopped and ate, more than once--and dang, Jack's F-250 took plenty of gas but what could you do--and it got dark and they got to that crossroads where you wondered if and when and where you were going to stop for the night.

Of course on the way down, the previous incarnation, you had Dani in Palm Springs, which would be more or less the midway point from Tucson this time, so that had solved *that*, you broke it up into 2 days . . . but the difference here, you didn't have Dani, but more importantly Pike didn't want to put Heidi in an awkward situation by bringing up the idea of a motel. He couldn't help thinking about her Uncle Bill too, looking at him earnestly in front of the house and trusting him to not get carried away here.

So he said, "Can you drive this thing, you think? Would you be comfortable?"

"Hmm," she said. "I can try. Sure."

This wasn't all that encouraging. Pike's idea was trade off the driving and keep going all night, straight through.

He liked the all-night part, but it seemed wiser to hammer down a bunch of coffee and stay behind the wheel himself. The truck was a bit of a beast to handle, there was a definite learning curve before you got in your comfort zone.

Probably not the best idea to have Heidi be experimenting as they barrelled along in the dark.

So the next gas station convenience store, he came out of there with a big cardboard jug type thing, and the coffee was pretty dang weak but there was more than enough of it to do the job, and Pike turned up the heat and Heidi found some music and the weather cooperated. It was cold and clear and the moon was out and you could see a lot.

“Nature is an amazing thing,” Heidi was saying. “The scope. Our insignificance really, in the true framework.”

Uh-oh, she was going intellectual on him, not to mention philosophical. Hopefully she wouldn't keep this up.

Pike said, “I'm more thinking, we shouldn't run into any snow. On account of the million stars that I think you're referring to.”

“Why that's a wonderful connection,” she said, and there was sort of a purr to it, if Pike was picking it up right, that at least she sounded content.

Always good, several hours in, where the passenger hasn't gotten antsy yet and changed their mind.

He actually didn't think you'd have to worry about snow anywhere on this route, period, now matter *what* the weather--which was I-10 for a good hunk, to 210 outside of Redlands, to the 5 to Lebec, then to 99 finishing it off until the cutoff for Beacon.

Heidi said, “I love Stephen King books. I've read most of them, but I've been catching up on a few that I *haven't* read, during Christmas break. His work is highly absorbing. For me anyway.”

Pike wasn't sure he liked the direction, the last thing he wanted to get into was Area 51 for example--not that farfetched a topic, since they were going be a little south of there, southern Nevada, but still in the neighborhood, especially desert terrain and open-spaces-wise.

“Oh yeah?” he said, a little cautiously, “which ones?”

“Well the first, ‘Under the Dome’.”

“Wait. They made a movie, right?” Though Pike hadn't seen it.

“No, but a TV series, yes. But the book--I actually found it credible, on some levels.”

“Hmm,” Pike said, “what’s it about?”

“Essentially . . . a giant dome--it’s totally indestructible--it cuts a town off from the rest of the world.”

Pike got the idea and had heard enough. “What else?”

“Am I reading? Well, I finished ‘11/22/63’--that one, it’s a departure from his other novels. Now I’m into ‘Revival’. My sense is it will be more work to get through, it’s not as innocuous as much of his fiction . . . so far anyway, the novel takes a hard look at addiction, against an eerie yet quite realistic backdrop of religious fanaticism.”

Pike was starting to get intimidated here. He said, “Were you this smart, like back in high school too . . . or you *developed* more at U of A?”

She laughed, worked her fingers up the back of his neck, fiddled around with his hair. “Thank you. I mean I know you’re just saying it. But it means a lot.”

Pike could assure her, he wasn’t just saying it. And he kind of wanted to hear about the other book ‘11/22/63’. How it was different, as she was saying.

But here was the thing . . . he couldn’t be sure he didn’t already have this conversation with someone, the same darn book . . . it seemed important to figure that out, and he was racking his brain real hard, and couldn’t place anything.

If he had had that previous discussion, then for sure you hoped you weren’t going senile. Much more likely though of course, doubling up on something and not being aware of it was a bi-product of traveling somewhere and coming back. Especially early on, the (hopefully) small details didn’t always line back up at first.

So why not, he asked Heidi about that one and she said, “It’s a fascinating premise, actually. When you allow yourself to suspend disbelief and buy in.”

Pike had a sense what was coming, was thinking uh-oh . . . and why am I not surprised?

“Hmm,” he said.

“Though the ending--not to spoil it for you--didn’t work for me. The story moved at a painstaking crawl at times, though in a good way, a wholly appropriate one. But the resolution . . . as I say, I’m not sure.”

“You can spoil it for me,” Pike said.

“I can? Well, he’s trying to *stop* Oswald. And then he does, or so we think. But then the backlash, the counter-effects if you will, were entirely unexpected developments for the protagonist.”

“Hmm,” Pike said again.

“It was quite fascinating though. The give and take, the cat and mouse. At one point he actually moves into an apartment across the street from Lee Oswald in Dallas.”

“Keep an eye on him, you’re saying,” Pike chimed in.

“Exactly. Before that--before Oswald moved to Dallas--and what I’m leaving out, the main character tries to arrive in Dallas a bit later, closer to the assassination attempt, but he can’t always control his arrival dates.”

“No,” Pike said, “probably not, it sounds like.” This was getting eerie. But you had . . . like 400 miles to Beacon . . . so unless a better subject line overtook this one, you might as well keep going.

“Of course the benefit to the reader,” Heidi said, “is you gain insight into another time and place. Almost like you are watching a documentary.”

“Ah-ha,” Pike said. “What year we talking again? Specifically?”

“1963, silly. I know you’re just pretending.”

Pike realized he hadn’t grasped the obvious significance of the title. “That’s embarrassing,” he said.

“I think it’s just fine,” she said, and she angled her head onto his arm. Unfortunately the F-250 cab was a little too wide and she couldn’t leave it there long without straining an abdominal muscle or something. Unless she took off her seat belt and really slid over, but that was for the past generations--where things were simpler and less regulated and probably more dangerous--such as Dallas in 1963.

“So in the story,” Pike said, “the guy arrives *early* you say? What does he do to . . . you know . . . kill time.”

“Well as I’ve alluded to, that’s fascinating part. It doesn’t directly impact the overlying plot--and in fact last semester I took a beginning creative writing course, and the teacher--the professor--she made that point repeatedly.”

“Leave out, like the parts a reader might skip?” Pike said.

“Yes, pretty much! I feel Stephen King though is in a class by himself.”

“He can get away with that stuff then.”

“Un-huh. Our professor’s point was don’t stray too far from the main story line. And certainly, that *could* precipitate a devout reader skipping a section, or multiple ones.”

“Okay,” Pike said, “you gotta use more common words here . . . and secondly you didn’t answer my question, *you* went off on a different direction. You’re starting to act like Stephen King.”

Heidi paused for a moment, Pike thinking un-oh she might think I’m serious, so when she looked over he tried giving her a wink, not sure she could pick it up in the dark, but it seemed to work. She said, “The main character, his name was Jake--and hold on please, no I’m confused.”

“That’s a first. Take your time, get it straight.”

“He has only *one* option, I’m recalling now. He must travel back to a *specific* date in 1958 that is available to him through a manner of portal. He has no control over that. So yes, it makes sense now--*that’s* what it is--he is *forced* to wait 5 or so years until the 1963 incident.”

“Bull *crap*,” Pike said.

Heidi laughed. “Excuse me?”

Pike had reacted and just blurted it out, and was trying to rein it in now. “All’s I’m saying, that doesn’t sound . . . realistic, does it? Guy’s stuck with one way in, can’t do anything *about* it?”

“Well yes, it worked for *me*. Which leads to my earlier reference, the reader being on a journey in old small town Texas and eventually Dallas.”

“How’s he spend those 5 years then? I have to tell you, just picturing it, that’d be brutal.”

“One would think. But he becomes a high school teacher, and leads a relatively satisfying life, while at the same time keeping an eye on the calendar and waiting for Lee Harvey Oswald to arrive in Dallas.”

“So,” Pike said, “that’d be the part the readers might skip. At least according to your professor . . . Just have him arrive a day or two before President Kennedy comes to Dallas. Save all that *time*, and get the readers cut right to the chase.”

“You’re funny. And possibly you are correct. But there’s more of interest once Lee Oswald shows up. Jake actually moves into an apartment across the street from him, so he can monitor his activities.”

“Oh my God,” Pike said. “And how long was this before the assassination?”

“A couple of years I’m guessing. At least one.”

“What you’re telling me, the guy spends 3, 3 and a half years teaching high school someplace, completely unrelated to the President Kennedy situation--and then wastes another year and a half keeping tabs on the idiot? What’s the point.”

“I’m not sure, exactly. What would *your* idea be, if *you* were writing that story?”

“How would *I* work it? . . . Well it seems to me--and I’d have to refresh myself on exactly how it went down--but you stop the guy from entering the building . . . what was it, the bank depository?”

“The school book depository.”

“Yeah. So you don’t let him *in* there. And the motorcade proceeds normally, and President Kennedy lives happily ever after.” Pike knew it wasn’t this simple, the result part, but don’t worry about that for now.

Heidi said, “That’s . . . certainly one approach I suppose.”

“What?” Pike said. “You’re saying fine, but then there’s no story. The book’s about 30 pages long.”

“Yes, that . . . but it seems too simple, as well. Somehow.”

“Well what you’re shooting for, first and foremost, is don’t waste any more time than you have to. Say for instance you *can’t* stop Oswald from entering the building. You think you’ve got him under control--maybe you got in his way when he was walking there. Or if, say he took the bus, you give it a flat tire maybe.”

Heidi was thinking about it, smiling. “Screw something up, as you would put it.”

“Now you got it,” Pike said, and he reached over and held her hand, and this was going to be okay, the 350 or so miles you still had to cover.

Pike continued, starting to get into it. “If that’s not going to work--either stopping him from entering the building--or rewinding it a bit, stopping him--or at least delaying him--from getting *to* the dang building . . . then maybe you need a plan B. But only then.”

“I see. And what would *that* plan be?”

“I don’t know.”

“You really are a goofball. But you certainly have an active imagination. *You* should write a story.”

“Me? Nah.”

“You used the term *rewinded*. That was employed periodically in the book as well, and I found it interesting.”

“Hmm.”

“Yes. When Jake came back to the present-day--and this was Maine not surprisingly . . .”

“Plenty of his books set there,” Pike said. “I did like the one about the car that goes nuts . . . But when he comes back to present day--*what* happens?”

“Only, that if he decides to go back to 1958 again, that new attempt nullifies whatever he may have altered previously. So everything resets. Whatever he may have altered previously is erased. I realize *that’s* the term, not *rewinds*.”

“Okay now, what a *total* crock of nonsense,” Pike said. “Sorry . . . I didn’t mean to get carried away there.”

“My,” Heidi said, “we’re quite passionate about the story, apparently. By all means then, you should read the book.”

“Maybe some time . . . What other . . . stuff . . . happens to the main guy? Since he seems to need to go back to 1958.” Chris felt himself gritting his teeth. He knew he was being irrational but couldn’t help it.

“Well,” she said, “if you’re asking, what other organized elements of time travel surfaced? There would be 2 more that I can think of. The first, no matter how long Jack stayed in 1958--days, weeks, even years--only 2 minutes elapsed in the present.”

“TOTAL garbage,” Pike said. “What’s the other one?”

“Gosh. I have to say you’re entertaining me. It’s as though someone threw a switch.”

“And I came to life,” he said. “. . . this is just my opinion of course.”

“Yes. I don’t mean that negatively, far from it . . . The second was, the more difficult the task, the more obstacles were thrown in the protagonist’s path.”

“Okay,” Pike said, “*that* one I’ll give you.” There was similar language in the **10 Rules**, he couldn’t recall the specifics, but at least Stephen King got was in the ballpark there . . . and Pike was thinking of his own complicated experience with the obstacles in the Milburns’ deal.

His phone rang and he asked Heidi to check it and it was Mitch. It was coming up on 1 am, and when Mitch called late at night it was generally important, unfortunately.

Pike pulled off at the next rest area and called him back. Mitch said, “Sorry to bother you there sport.”

“You’re not bothering me, don’t worry about it,” Pike lied.

“Uh. Well that job you gave me, I did make contact with your friend.”

Pike assumed this would be Erline and reminded Mitch that she’s not my friend, I’ve never talked to the person, but to spit it out, what do you have.

“Well,” Mitch said. “One of the the transplant patients--another one--has been difficult to handle. This one, in Missoula, Montana. 36 year old male.”

“Difficult to handle, *how*.” Pike knew whatever answer came back wouldn’t be good.

“He shot a man in a bar scrap.”

“Killed him?”

“No, wounded him. Erline said it was touch and go for while--in the abdomen--but the person pulled through.”

“Okay this is a dumb question,” Pike said, “but don’t they . . . shoot people sometimes *anyway* . . . in Montana? In bars. Saloons . . . I mean it still is kind of the Old West there, right?”

“Son I know where you’re going and that occurred to me too--but that’s a reach. This gentleman--before the procedure--never drank alcohol, never displayed any violent tendencies.”

“Oh,” Pike said. “What was the body part, do we know?”

“Trachea.”

“Holy Smokes, pretty major then.”

“Yeah . . . Listen, I’ll let you go. I hate to say this . . . and I’ll keep an eye on it, and I’ll stay in close touch with Erline . . .”

“But?”

“But . . . we may have to have a meeting of the minds, before too long.”

Pike said, “Let’s not think ahead,” and they hung up.

Heidi waited until they’d been back on the highway for a few minutes. “At the risk of prying,” she said, “may I ask what was that all about? If I didn’t know better, you sounded like a secret agent or something.”

Pike took a deep breath. As comfortable as he was with Heidi right now you couldn’t let her in on any of this. Even a little tiny morsel of it. It wouldn’t be fair. He said, “Okay, you know this Mitch, right? I mean, I guess you never met him but you probably heard of him, since he was putting us up, me and Jack.”

“Yes. He sounds colorful.”

“One way to look at it. The thing about Mitch . . . the poor guy’s in fantasy land. He has this website, people contact him with their stories of seeing UFO’s . . . He buys into it. Are you starting to get the idea?”

“I believe in UFO’s,” Heidi set. “Not that we’re witnessing them on earth--necessarily--but scientifically, when you factor in the the magnitude of the universe, how could one not at least entertain the probability?”

Pike said, “Okay not the greatest example, on Mitch. Bottom line, the guy can’t sleep great, and he calls me at weird hours sometimes, and I listen to his nonsense and it helps him . . . Fair enough?”

“Fair enough,” she said. “What was the question you posed about the body part though?”

Pike took a moment. “You know something,” he said, “you’re pretty cute, you don’t mind my saying.” Sticking his finger against her cheek.

He left it at that, hoping that would work, and pretty soon Heidi fell asleep, and Pike had to admit she *did* look pretty dang cute curled up over there against the night.

Chapter 16

Before he departed Anthem Pike had told Mitch about Dani's new information, and he gave Mitch the job of making contact with Erline.

He didn't mean to be bossing the old guy around, but the fact was Mitch had as much of a vested interest as anyone, and he enjoyed this stuff, whether he always admitted it or not.

So Mitch had done his due diligence and reached Erline and gotten the latest, and he could have waited until the morning to call Pike, nothing anyone could do about it right now--or likely soon for that matter--and hopefully *never*.

Pike still treated these random bits of slightly alarming news, allegedly all stemming from Don's situation, as anomalies. That there's no set pattern, no root cause, that, as he was telling Mitch, you could take an ordinary guy--a *non-Don* transplant one--and things could unfortunately go wrong there too.

It wasn't great to hear about another one, obviously. Pike thought of something, and when they stopped for gas an hour later, Heidi still fast asleep, Pike called Mitch, didn't bother asking if he woke him up, but told him to please come up with a breakdown of every recipient of Don's--and spread-sheet it out, and you hated to be blunt, but, organized by:

body part received

male/female

age

occupation

location

any unusual behavior reported

Mitch said good idea, that made sense, and he'd start that process next time he contacted Erline.

Pike didn't want to sound like the one who was a little nervous here, so he said fine, and to put it together at your convenience--though the truth was he hoped Mitch wouldn't wait too long.

Heidi slept what seemed like forever and Pike was thinking Gee, that activity yesterday at the zoo and go-kart place must have taken it out of her . . . but obviously it was the middle of the night and that's what people did unless they were caffeined up the wazoo like him.

She woke up when they were in the home stretch, about 50 miles to go, and as though there had been no interruption, she picked up the '11/22/63' thing where she left off.

She said, "As far as what happened at the end--if you really *don't* mind a spoiler?"

Pike said he didn't at all, and she said, "Well. I may not be entirely accurate, but the point the reader retains is that a monumental change to the historical record--such as preventing a presidential assassination--does not come without consequences."

"Wait," Pike said, "so he does stop it?"

"Yes he does."

"How did he pull it off? I have to hear *this* one."

Heidi said, "It's interesting. At times you seem wholly engaged and on board, and at others you seem quite cynical."

"Sorry about that," Pike said. "Don't take me too seriously here."

"Anyhow, Jake in his surveillance of Lee Harvey Oswald learns that Oswald may have a friend in Dallas, an accomplice."

"A Mafia dude, he's saying?"

"No. Someone in the CIA. Jake gets thrown off by that prospect, gives too much weight to it, and nearly loses track of Lee Oswald on the critical day."

"But?"

“Oswald has made it to the window of the depository, but Jake arrives at the last minute and charges him and disrupts the gun shot.”

Pike said, “Oh boy. Okay, now we’re in *movie* territory. What are the *odds* something like that would actually happen?”

“You’re probably correct, yes.”

“In *real* life--I mean, *fake* real life, but you know what I’m saying--without the bells of whistles where you have to entertain an audience with cheap stunts--he stops the guy short of the *building*, like I say . . . No glamour to doing it that way though.”

Heidi said, “Maybe you should provide that feedback to Stephen King. Many writers and celebrities are on Twitter now, they are accessible.”

“So what’s the *final* final you’re hinting at?” he said.

“Jake is applauded for his work, recognized, and is given an award by the FBI. But then a few days later there is a large catastrophic earthquake in Los Angeles, the symmetry of which he doesn’t connect to his actions--but when he returns to the present, the world is quite different.”

“*More* movies and TV . . . but how *so*?”

“Well, it began with a radical candidate winning the next presidential election--I believe it was George Wallace--which led to a subsequent nuclear exchange, and . . . okay granted, perhaps it *was* farfetched from there.”

Pike was thinking *sure*, when you changed something--in this case prevented something fairly drastic--there *would* be the ripple effect. But extending all the way to the nuclear option? No way.

“So that was it?” he said. “Or, the guy goes back and undoes the whole thing?”

“How did you guess,” she said.

“Only because you told me he could re-set stuff. Every new time he went back . . . Honestly? It shouldn’t be that *easy*. That would make a better story.”

You could tell Heidi was getting a kick out of this. “How *should* it work then?” she said.

“If he screwed up? But doing what he thought was the right thing and stopping the shooter?”

“Unh-huh.”

“He’d have to go back again, get there sooner. Then let events proceed as normal, not get in Oswald’s way.”

Pike was a little confused himself, thinking for a moment, *would* it work like that?

“But he can’t get there sooner,” she said, “he’s limited to the particular date in 1958.”

“You keep *saying* that,” Pike said, “but that’s a joke. He can, he just doesn’t know it . . . I mean, that would have been a lot more logical, have it structured *that* way, the book. Don’t you think?”

Heidi said, “Again, your enthusiasm is quite potent . . . I’m not sure where it’s all coming from at 5 in the morning.”

“Me neither,” Pike said, and they both laughed, and Pike’s focus shifted to what really seemed important now-- should they stop *short* of Beacon and have breakfast, or get there *first* and figure it out.

Heidi said, “One other interesting component of the story, there is a gentleman who Jake tries to help in the beginning. In fact that was the genesis of the larger effort, with JFK . . . When Jake learns that he can truly travel back in time--from the basement of his local diner . . . ”

“Meaning the diner was older than 1958, was that the set-up?” Pike said.

“That I’m not sure of. The gentleman he’s helping is a janitor. When the janitor was young he absorbed a terrible beating from his abusive father, which left him mentally impaired.”

“Okay I get the picture. What happens?”

“I don’t recall specifically now, except that he intercedes and the man doesn’t suffer the beating. However, at the end of the book, as an addendum to the nuclear drama, Stephen King throws in that by surviving the beating and thereby being fit, the man is drafted into the Viet Nam war, and that doesn’t end well.”

“Ooh boy,” was what Pike couldn’t help saying. He was processing it. He had to concede that King may be onto *something*--certain parts at least, to a degree--though you’d still chalk up a lot of it to fantasy.

He couldn’t help wondering though, as he flicked on the right blinker for the Beacon turn-off, finally: Could you really *do* something like that--stop the murder of John F. Kennedy?

It wasn’t like he was going to try it right now for Gosh sakes, nothing at all like *that* . . . but who knows, it might be something to run by Mitch.

Chapter 17

“This is certainly a nice friendly town you have here,” Heidi was saying. They were in B’s Cafe downtown, Heidi was the one enjoying the big breakfast, Pike having hit the wall all of a sudden, with the effect of the monster drive he just handled kicking in.

Part of Pike’s concern at this point was not running directly into high school classmates who might easily expose him as the fraud he was, and not the college student he’d been lying to Heidi about.

That said, he was tired enough right now that it might not matter, you’d try and roll with it, whatever came down.

It didn’t take long before Jack Hannamaker got in the picture. He texted Pike a couple times yesterday and Pike ignored them, but now with Heidi putting down her fork for a moment and doing something on her own phone Pike figured it wouldn’t be rude to get back to the guy, and Jack returned his text pretty quick and asked if he’d made it, and Pike said yep he was eating breakfast, sort of.

B’s was their basic no-frills restaurant of choice, he and Jack, unless they got adventurous and headed the 11 miles out to Art’s Span by the mall, which had an all-you-can-eat deal that took care of you for the day. Pike figured if Jack was available at present he’d know where Pike was and maybe show up. Which wouldn’t be the worst thing. He wasn’t exactly *tired* of Heidi, but you *could* use a little diversity, and no doubt she could too.

Sure enough the guy comes strutting through the door about 10 minutes later like he owns the joint, and squeezes in next to Pike and reaches over without asking and grabs a piece of Pike’s bacon.

“Hi again,” Jack said to Heidi.

“Hi yourself,” she said, and for the first time--or maybe Pike missed the signal down in Phoenix--he noticed some chemistry between them.

Pike cleared his throat. “How’s Andrea doing?” he said. “Everything hunky dory with the plane ride and all?”

“*That* part was fine,” Jack said. “Two things--full disclosure. We broke up on the airport shuttle thingamajig.”

“Hmm,” Pike said. “The one to the airport down *there*? Or *from* it up here?”

“Idiot,” Jack said, “you *drove* us to the airport down there.”

“Oh yeah,” Pike said.

“That’s so sad,” Heidi said. “I feel for you.”

“Fine that’s one,” Pike said, “what do we got for number two?” And he said to Heidi, “Always a lot of drama with this guy.” But Heidi didn’t much react to that, she was all-in at the moment, studying Jack.

“*Two* is I lost my job,” Jack said. “So here we are.”

Pike said, “The one you never had.”

“You know something?” Jack said.

“I was thinking, when he laid that on us,” Pike said to Heidi, “this guy barely worked a day in his life.”

“That’s a cheap shot, man,” Jack said. And Pike knew he stepped over the line a bit, that Jack’s uncle had a moving company and Jack did help him out, and even Pike himself pitched in over there on a couple Sundays when they were short.

Meanwhile though, now Pike was wondering, had Jack really changed when Pike came back from Idaho--playing up the new enterprising side and all--or . . . was the dude just using the fake job excuse to get back to Beacon early. In other words, the same old guy.

And if that was the case, why *would* he want to get back to Beacon so soon--but Jack was complicated that way, and you probably weren’t going to find out, and what did it matter, he had his reasons.

On the other hand . . . Jack did own the F-250 now, so that was definitely different, and he had to pay for the thing somehow.

Pike said out loud what he was thinking. "I'm having more trouble putting 2 and 2 together these days . . . and yeah sorry, that was a cheap shot."

Heidi said to Jack, "So what precipitated you two breaking up? Was it the culmination of something you'd like to discuss?"

Jack gave Pike a little look, and Pike knew where he was going, like is the girl for *real*, but not necessarily minding it either.

Jack said, "Well these things happen. We decided we wanted our space." And Pike couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic, but it seemed like an okay time to step outside and catch a little fresh air, and get back to one other person--Frankie--who had also texted him. Not yesterday, but a couple days ago, before he had to take off for Idaho.

Frankie of course was the good-hearted librarian in town who helped Pike back in the beginning, climbing on a ladder in a special reference room and bringing down for Pike the old leather-bound volume, **The 10 Rules of Time Travel**.

Pike had met with Frankie a few more times, at the ice cream place, and he didn't exactly outline everything that was going on with him--it wasn't quite on the level of his relationship with Mitch--but Frankie got the idea, and made some suggestions. Pike was never sure if the suggestions actually helped--when he had to go someplace--but he suspected they did, and how could they *hurt*.

Right now Frankie's phone went to voice mail and Pike went back into the cafe--and Jeez, Jack and Heidi weren't quite side by side cuddling up, but they were both leaning forward and whatever they were talking about they were both *highly* into . . . and Pike announced that he really was shot, and was heading home for a while, and would Jack mind showing Heidi the sights--such as they were--of beautiful Beacon while he re-charged the batteries.

And Jack nodded and absentmindedly opened his hand and Pike stuck the F-250 keys in there and went back outside and had to call an Uber of all things, to take him home after driving 500 miles to get here . . . and as per normal, there

was no one around in the house, that Pike had to waste time saying hello to, and he went up to his room and when he saw the bed he barely made it there in time and was out like a light for 12 hours.

Chapter 18

Frankie said, "It's good to see you, my friend."

It seemed like a lot of people lately were telling other people it was good to see them, but with Frankie it was genuine, and appreciated, and there was no ulterior motive behind it, that was for sure.

She was a good hearted lady, and Pike couldn't remember if her personal life had ever come up--maybe it *had* actually, once, where she told him matter of factly that her marriage years ago hadn't worked out. Either way, she was terrific at her job, and Pike was convinced early on that running the library--or whatever her official role was--was exactly the right fit. You had to envy that.

"It's good to see you as well," Pike was saying, and Frankie reached across and patted his hand, not like a mother exactly but more like a big sister might.

There was that one time though--Pike cutting through a residential neighborhood one Saturday night, and there were a bunch of people dressed up going up the steps of a big house, and Pike could have sworn one of them was Frankie, and she had on a short miniskirt and some kind of lacy stockings as he remembered it . . . and that had been hard to process. If it *was* her, what the heck might have been going on there.

Pike was in one of those moods, having slept the 12 hours and then gotten ahold of Frankie and meeting her here, 8:30 at night now, where you want to clear the decks and you don't mind butting in a little bit.

So he went for it, and said, "Before we get started on the *other* thing . . . and you don't have to answer . . . but was that *you* I saw one evening, a few

months back . . . dressed to kill if I do say so myself . . . heading into the big corner house on I think it was Marlboro Street?”

There was a hint of embarrassment from Frankie, Pike was pretty sure, and he might have been reading into it but he thought her cheeks reddened just a hair.

If there was anything to it, she composed herself quickly. She said, “You absolutely may have. I participate in . . . it’s a private theater group. And yes, we dress up, and get fully into character. It’s a wonderful outlet for me actually.”

“What play were you doing that night, then?” Pike said, on board with her now, that made sense.

Except she seemed to hedge slightly, and said she couldn’t remember the specific one, without knowing what night it was . . . and Pike figured you better leave it at that. That if she wasn’t being entirely truthful, and did have something mysterious going on, so be it. That, God knows we all have secrets.

“So,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “Now on the two tasks you gave me . . .”

“Dang, sorry about presenting them *that way*,” he said, “I didn’t mean to be pushing you around there.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. As you know, I love a research challenge . . . The first, the young man who played football, I’m afraid I’m not there yet.”

“That’s okay,” Pike said. “Really, don’t sweat it.”

“Oh no,” she said, “I fully intend to unlock that one. I do have some leads.”

This of course could be good and bad. This was the kid who Pike went to San Francisco for, about 20 years ago. The deal was the kid became paralyzed as a result of a play in a high school football game.

What Pike had done--which sounded crazy but seemed to do the job--was he inserted himself briefly into the game the week before the one where the kid got screwed up--and Pike himself injured the guy, not brutally but enough to keep him on the sidelines the next week, when the fateful play *did* occur--or was scheduled to.

And all seemed well and good until Pike returned home and later found out that yes, the kid *didn't* get paralyzed, but that he had something else going on in life that may be messing him up.

Pike couldn't locate the guy to find out and ran it by Frankie and she wanted to help. So there you were.

Pike said now, "You know I just did a long drive with someone, and it was weird how the conversation worked its way toward a story where a guy goes back about 50 years."

Frankie said, "Do you feel that was entirely coincidental? The direction of the conversation?"

She would do this some times, ask him the direct questions he didn't love answering. He knew that she did have a brother-in-law who told stories of himself doing some traveling. It wasn't clear whether Frankie entirely bought in, but the woman was at least highly open-minded, which you could appreciate.

And at this point . . . if you asked Pike whether *he* bought in . . . he wouldn't be 100 percent sure either.

The whole business--such as it was--was still mostly a big blur, to be honest . . . and it still didn't match the textbook definition of making sense.

Back to Frankie, Pike said, "This may have been coincidental. But the slightly spooky part, this person adds at the end, almost like an afterthought, that the guy in the story has a similar experience to me with the football kid . . . if any of that makes sense, and if you even *believe* me . . . which I *get*, if you don't."

"Not a concern, I'm with you honey," she said, and Pike was more than fine with that.

Totally separate, but since you were referring to Heidi--God knows where *she* was at this point, only that she was with Jack--that much was clear--and that could mean a lot of things. No point losing sleep over it, you knew the girl a total of 2 days--give or take.

Pike did feel a little guilt though, thinking of Bill, Heidi's good guy uncle in Arizona. Pike had assured him he'd take care of her. You'd hope you could

loosely apply that to having Jack showing her around. Since you trusted the guy.
Mostly.

The other thing of course, Heidi was an adult and made her own bed. Something kind of funky Pike was realizing--Jack was almost 19, he'd admitted to Pike once that they had him repeat first grade, which was in Milwaukee.

So unless this latest incarnation changed something with that, which was unlikely--and you combine that with Heidi turning out to be off-the-charts smart, it wouldn't be surprising that she *skipped* a grade someplace . . . So who knows, they probably weren't very far off each other in age.

Frankie said, "I'm not following you completely though. The person referenced in the story *also* is a football player? Or *encounters* one?"

"I'm explaining it sloppy," Pike said. "The parallel part--the book character thinks he adjusts something, for the better . . . Only to find, it, like, sets off something *else* equally bad, maybe worse."

"How so?"

"Ooh boy. What kind of shock me up, the specific guy--he gets saved from being *mentally* screwed up . . . and then because he's *not* mentally screwed up, he gets drafted to Viet Nam--which wouldn't have *happened* otherwise. He would have avoided it."

"And he unfortunately, perishes in the Viet Nam war?"

"That, or survives it, but comes back majorly screwed up a *different* way."

Frankie took a moment and said quietly, "Well, we assume that phenomenon to be *true*--in theory--do we not?"

"Sure, and probably backed up somewhere in the **10 Rules**, right?"

"An equal and opposite reaction is what is referenced, I believe."

"Okay fine. And without going into details . . . let's just leave it that *I've* experienced some of that . . . But not at this level."

"Until perhaps this case, your football player friend."

"Yeah him," Pike said.

Frankie didn't say anything, which was appropriate. She hadn't solved that one yet, so why speculate.

Pike said, “Pivoting on you for just a sec . . . nothing to do with any of this . . . really. But could someone really go--you know, inter-dimensionally--and change a historical event?”

Frankie smiled. “I was in a bookstore in London last year,” she said. “The oldest one still standing, it dates to the 18th century. A splendid operation on the famous Piccadilly Circus.”

“Let me guess,” Pike said, “that’s a *street*. Also--*splendid*--is that in your normal vocabulary, or you’re going British on me now?”

“Indeed,” she said, whatever that meant. “What I’m driving at--you’ll find an entire section there that on some level is exploring the question you are posing.”

Pike said, “More directly . . . could someone stop Lee Harvey Oswald.”

This got Frankie shifting around. She and Pike both knew they largely avoided the specifics of what Pike may or may not be capable of doing. But this was quite a supposition.

“How would someone *manage* that?” she said, not that differently than Heidi had wondered about it in Jack’s truck in the middle of the night.

“You’re supposed to tell *me*,” Pike said, trying to lighten it back up, and Frankie smiled, and the potentially world-changing moment on the table . . . hypothetically of course . . . had passed.

The ice cream place was starting to close up, they were sweeping and mopping, and Pike and Frankie went outside. She said, “The second task you gave me, I located Audrey Milburn.”

It took a minute to register, and then Pike felt his jaw slam open and his head was spinning, and his voice was weaker . . . as he asked her to repeat what she just said.

“I was able to trace the family to Rochester, New York,” Frankie said. “From there, in 2009, they moved to Amsterdam. In the Netherlands.”

“Oh,” was all Pike could manage, his throat tight.

“Which was a brief stint apparently. Later that year, they appeared in Vero Beach, Florida.” Frankie had her notes out, her reading glasses on. “Yes, that’s

what I thought,” she said, “it was 2012 when they settled in Epic Junction, Kansas.”

Frankie closed her notes and let it hang, and Pike couldn't come up with anything to say--how could you, right now.

Pike had missed Audrey terribly after the Milburns left, but lately--and maybe it was a defense mechanism--he'd managed to push her mostly out of his conscious mind.

It had become almost as though he never knew her. Which was not quite accurate. It was more like, he *knew* her, but in a *dream*, and you woke up and moved on. Now and then you *remembered* the dream, but the impact had diminished.

So here with Frankie--the *real* here and now--Pike was stunned, blown away by Frankie's simple, concise delivery of the information, not that different than a TV newscaster reading a report.

A million questions swirled around, but it was too much for tonight. He said good night to Frankie and she got in her car and left, and he stood there a while . . . and finally he pulled out his phone and figured he better see what was up with Jack and Heidi.

Chapter 19

Neither one of them returned his text, which ticked him off, and by midnight Pike was exhausted again despite the monster nap today, and he sent a final text to Jack, telling him to let Heidi into the basement and set her up on the couch down there.

Jack of course had the key--this went back to when they constructed The Box and stuck on their own outside lock--and Pike didn't feel great about not being able to provide a better overnight arrangement, but he couldn't think of any. His original idea, driving up here, was *he'd* be the one squaring Heidi away down there, making sure she was comfortable, and he'd even introduce her to his parents if they were around . . . but what could you do.

So Pike hit the sack--he did take the time to find Epic Junction, Kansas, on a map, but that was it--not knowing what the story would be, since still neither Jack or Heidi had answered him back. And that was one thing that crossed his mind sometimes and was doing it again now . . . if he ever had *kids*, rule No 1 would be answer people's texts and emails. Jeez.

Around 3 in the morning, with Pike at that stage of sleep a few hours in, the REM pattern or whatever, where you've got perfection and it's like a drug and you're on a kind of high--that was when Hannamaker interrupted it all with a tap on the window.

And it wasn't exactly a tap, since Pike's bedroom was a full story up, it was the idiot tossing a pebble at the glass from the backyard. *Multiple* ones in fact until Pike got the idea and woke up and opened the darn thing.

Pike was rubbing his eyes and the words came out slurred. "You got a lot of nerve pal . . . Of all the garbage you've pulled recently, this takes the cake . . . What in the world are you *doing*?"

“Sorry Bud,” Jack said. He looked away for a second like a little kid who got caught doing something he knew he shouldn’t have--but then he met Pike’s eyes again strong and said, “You need to help me *out* here.” Pointing downstairs, the basement.

Which was weird, why would something like that be necessary if Jack set Heidi up down there like he instructed? And if for some crazy reason they were both locked out--then where was *she*?

You didn’t want to wake up the neighborhood--much less his parents and little brother and sister--by continuing this ridiculous dialogue with Jack out the window . . . so Pike extremely reluctantly pulled on his jeans and went downstairs and around back.

“What they did, I told ‘em to get *out* of there, then some guy pulled a knife on me,” Jack said.

Pike was significantly more awake now. “Huh?” he said.

“Not *Fox*, but some dudes who used to *hang* with Fox. I’m not believing this.”

Pike was trying to process it. “Where’s Heidi?” was the first logical thing you better find out.

“She’s okay,” Jack said. “They don’t know about her. Being down there . . . These jerk-faces, they’re messing around in The Box.”

Which was on the other side of the basement from the little living area that Pike’s dad had fixed up once when he was going to turn the whole basement into a huge family room. What he did complete wasn’t bad though, Pike had hung out there a bit, with various people, plenty of privacy.

Including Gee, his original girlfriend Cathy. That part sure seemed like a long time ago.

Jack too, Pike remembered now, when Pike helped him move the drums that his step-dad was going to sell, Jack slept down there for a while.

Pike said, “That was a bad idea of mine.”

“Giving a key to Fox you mean?”

“What *else* am I referring to?” Pike said. “Though you’re right, in the bad idea department I guess you can take your *pick*.”

“You were right the first time,” Jack said, and Pike couldn’t argue this one. When he and Jack built the darn thing they started up a little makeshift band, and different kids started dropping in . . . and after all that had gone down between Pike and Fox, and Fox’s old man, Pike, in a moment of wanting to move past stuff, gave Fox a key so he could--not come as he *pleased* for Gosh sakes, but use The Box now and then. Pike supposed it was sort of a peace offering.

And honestly up to this point it had gone okay. Fox was back at Hamilton and Pike would see him in the hall and they didn’t have a lot to say to each other but at least it was civil.

Now apparently, whether Fox was involved or not, or whether he unfortunately passed that key on to someone else . . . we had a problem.

“The obvious thing,” Pike said, “should we call the police.”

“Yeah I thought of that, I almost did,” Jack said. “But then there’s fallout maybe . . . who knows how it plays out.”

Pike had to agree with this, plus you had Heidi camping out down there which didn’t help your cause and you had your parents not aware of any it, which *really* didn’t help it.

There were the two ways down there, the main way from inside the house being the other. So Pike and Jack quietly went back inside and Pike opened the door alongside the kitchen and they tiptoed downstairs.

Heidi was up and standing next to the furnace, twisting her hands around, and Pike hoped she didn’t know that someone--allegedly--pulled a knife on Jack . . . and she seemed okay, concerned, but not at that level.

And *allegedly*, because you couldn’t trust Jack. He was in the ballpark--usually--with the root of what he told you, but he could still embellish the heck out of it.

Pike was putting it together, that what seemed to have gone down was Jack saying goodnight to Heidi, and her phoning him an hour or two later, that there was something going on in the other part of the basement.

So Jack would have hustled over there, used his own key, and admittedly in *Jack* fashion probably wasn't overly diplomatic in confronting whoever *was* in The Box at that moment--and some guy reacts and threatens him. Putting Jack in the back yard throwing stones at Pike's window.

There were some instruments permanently installed in The Box, starting with Jack's drumset, where without thinking they built the box structure around it without leaving a door wide enough to ever get the things out of there--and Pike added a couple guitars and someone stuck in a bass and a short keyboard.

Right now, you could hear these jerkells playing the instruments. Pretty faint fortunately, since Jack and Pike had paid attention to soundproofing the heck out of The Box when they finished it off. But *these* guys now, it was more like they noticed the instruments and started fooling around. No skill on display except for one guy picking a guitar, who you could tell could play a little.

"Which guy," Pike said to Jack, leaving out which guy *what*, not wanting to alarm Heidi.

"*Big* guy," Jack said, trying to keep it light also. "Tattoos rising out of the top of his t-shirt."

"Any, like females in there?" Pike said. That'd be all you needed, having to worry about something going on in that department as well.

"Not that I saw," Jack said, and Pike knew what this meant, the viewing part, since you typically climbed up the rope and swung over the top of one wall of The Box and dropped in.

"Excuse us," Pike said to Heidi. "Continue to make yourself comfortable, we'll be right back."

They moved out of earshot and Pike said, "So what . . . the guy like, points it *up* at you?"

"Nah, I dropped all the way in. It was normal enough at first, I'm asking them to please leave. I told 'em I was *you*, and they were keeping me awake."

"Very thoughtful of you to involve me. How'd they react to that?"

“Two ways. First, none of them ever heard of you--I realize there’s three of ‘em, now that I’m recreating it . . . Second, the one guy told me to do you know *what* to myself.”

“That tatted one?”

“No, different one. The tatted guy only came to life when I grabbed the other one and jammed his face into the sheetrock . . . Sorry about that by the way, we’re going to need to do a small patch job.”

You had to wonder sometimes how this guy was chemically made up, where he’d be joking at a time like this. But yeah, Jack could fly off the handle with the best of them so there was some logic there--that his way of mediating the situation--meaning head on, in this case literally--*could* stir some emotions.

Meanwhile, Pike and Jack approached the outside of The Box. The screwing around with the musical instruments had subsided and you could hear muffled sounds of the three doofuses talking and laughing.

Pike was a getting a headache. Not a major throbbing top of the skull one, but a nuisance enough one, things ricocheting around behind his eyebrows.

You didn’t want to always follow Jack’s lead and take the direct approach, but unless someone came up with a better idea you were frankly headed that direction.

The problem being of course that once again Pike had to be careful displaying his abnormal strength. Not just in front of the three idiots he’d be speaking to in a moment, but being careful to not display anything too unusual in front of Jack either.

The basketball dunk business had been a bit of an exception, and it seemed harmless enough in the end, since he wouldn’t be hanging around and having to answer any questions. Plus that one guy guarding him, he got under his skin . . . but still in real time you control yourself in that situation--or try to.

Pike took a big exhale and told Jack take it easy, that he had this, and Pike climbed up the rope and swung a leg over the top and was straddling the far wall of The Box.

The three of them were semi-lying down, and Pike and Jack had set up cushions in there which admittedly were pretty comfortable. Pike said, “Everyone okay down there? Anyone *need* anything?”

The one guy spoke, the tatted guy who apparently flashed the knife. “What you got in mind dudy?” He laughed sort of scary-wild, like a mental patient, and the other two guys did too. You could smell booze oozing up, pretty strong, not beer or wine, the real stuff.

“Okay listen,” Pike said, “the reason I’m checking on y’all--we’ll be needing you to stay the night . . . So Sweet dreams.” Pike called down to Jack to lock everything up, that their friends are *comfortable*, and they’ll check on them at noon tomorrow.

Jack looked at Pike weird and Pike looked *back* weird, and Jack got the idea, that this was all bull crap, and who knows where Pike was going with it, and Pike had no idea himself.

The three guys sort of looked at each other, and then one guy seemed to get a little nervous and said, “Whachoo *mean* you be checking on us, sucker? We be checking on *you*.”

This relaxed the other two and they all laughed again and the tatt guy extended a middle finger up to Pike.

“Fine then,” Pike said. “The only reason I ask, you don’t mind the jackhammering then.”

“The *who*?” the tatted guy said, standing up, clearly not in the mood for any more games.

Pike climbed back down and said to Jack, “You’d don’t have a flashlight on you, do you? I should have thought of that before.”

Jack fiddled with his belt and son of a gun, the guy did have one of those mini LED jobs attached to his keys. Pike took it and went across the basement to the circuit breaker box that was above the washer-dryer. He opened the box, found the main switch, and threw it, cutting all power the house.

Outside you could hear a big machine cranking up, and dang, the thing was loud, wasn't it. Pike told Jack to lock the inside door to the kitchen, so his parents wouldn't all of a sudden show up down here.

"Hmm," Jack said, over the roaring pitch of the machine. "And how do I do *that*, exactly, since the lock is on the other *side*?"

"Up to you," Pike said. "You gotta hold the handle *yourself*, then do it *that* way."

You could see Jack's brain working pretty quick and he found a roll of twine and headed up the stairs with it, and meanwhile Pike climbed back up onto the ledge of The Box and shined the flashlight on the--at the moment--not too happy campers--and he said, "Okay guys, now the way to stay safe--when they start the jackhammering--is herd yourselves into the center. Don't get near any of the 4 walls--oh, and don't touch anything at all, even each other, because stuff *conducts*--and you *should* be good."

Pike made sure to shine the light mostly on the tatted guy, and he squinted up at Pike and said, "Yo man. Y'all making a big *mistake*, I mean to tell you. You'll find out."

There wasn't as much oomph and bravado behind it as before, and neither of the other two guys laughed this time, or backed the guy up . . . and one of them, the smallest skinniest one, started climbing up the inside rope to get out of the Box.

"Not a bad idea," Pike said, "except we asked you to stick around, I thought?"

The first guy was up and over and down and the third guy was following him.

The tatted guy said, "You a crazy *@*&*@."

"That's what they *tell* me," Pike said. "The *jackhammer* guys, *they* made the appointment. I tried to change it but I couldn't . . . I know what you're *saying*, it's a real pain in the neck, especially to have them blow out the basement, and *us* having to watch where we're stepping."

This was about enough motivation for the tatted guy to start hauling himself up and over the wall and out of here, and he didn't have any more words for Pike, he clearly wanted to get a move on now.

Pike waited for the guy to land safely outside The Box and then he calmly took hold of his collar with his right hand, and in one motion stuck his arm straight up . . . dangling the guy overhead like someone might hold up a torch to signal to *another* guy . . . or whatever the heck.

Pike wondered, what *now* . . . I got him *up* there, but how do I wrap this up? He had the flashlight in his left hand, shining it up close on the guy like a spotlight.

“Okay now take it easy,” Hannamaker was saying, and you could tell *he* was a bit alarmed, despite being okay with the fact that the tatted guy looked scared out of his mind.

So Pike thought, yeah, *don't* do anything rash, and wondering if he already did too *much*, and went over the line that he set for himself a couple minutes ago. Dang.

He let the guy down but still held him by the collar and told Jack to turn back on breaker Number 12 . . . and he figured that should keep the guy busy, because there probably *isn't* a breaker Number 12, not to mention Jack'll have enough trouble just *finding* the breaker box in the dark.

So Jack was gone and Pike had some privacy and he felt around on the guy and . . . oops, Jack was right unfortunately, the idiot *was* carrying a knife--and Pike didn't know weapons very well but this felt like it could do some damage, and it may or may not have technically been a switchblade, but you did push a button and then pull it open . . .

The bottom line being, Pike did all that, and then shined the light on the thing nice and clear for the guy . . . and then put down the flashlight for a moment--and dropped a *knee* on the guy so he'd stay put while Pike needed two hands--and Pike worked the blade between his index fingers, and *twisted* . . . and it was surprisingly soft, and the knife bent like a pretzel . . . and Pike turned

back on the flashlight and showed it to the guy--like a lab technician showcasing the result of an experiment--and handed it back to him.

Pike wasn't sure why he needed to end things that way--you could have simply taken the knife *away* from the moron and solidly convinced him to get lost and don't come back . . . but more than likely the episode with the senior citizen in Alaska was a factor, and Pike supposed handling it the more *proactive* way did make a reasonable statement.

The color had drained out of the guy's face, even by flashlight standards, and the guy absentmindedly took the knife back and started out of there, stumbling a bit at first and then running pretty darn fast toward the outside door, Pike assisting him by shining the flashlight on his path up and out of the basement.

The motor noise was pretty intolerable by now and Pike assumed not only his parents would be up and trying to shut the thing down, but that a bunch of neighbors would unfortunately have woken up as well . . . and Pike hustled back over to the breaker box, and there was poor Jack, who *had* located the thing but was using the light of his phone to try find Breaker 12 as Pike had instructed . . . and Pike said excuse me and threw the main switch, and all the power went flashing back on in the house, and the brutal sound of the motor in the side yard stopped.

Chapter 20

“Okay now that the circumstances appear settled,” Heidi said, “can you please shed some light on what transpired back there?”

“Down there, you mean?” Pike said.

“You *know* something,” Jack said, “there comes a point . . . a man gets weary of your games. Just answer the question, how about.”

“Hmm,” Pike said. Of course this was Hannamaker behaving normally. He was the cause of it, essentially, but it doesn’t take long for the guy to deflect the conflict toward someone else. Which usually meant Pike . . . So whatever.

They were back in Jack’s F-250, the three of them this time, Jack driving and Pike in back. Heidi had been angling her position from the front right seat slightly toward Pike since they got in.

It was around 5:00 in the morning, this was still Friday, and they were headed to the 24-hour Walmart out by the interstate.

Jack said, “Should we stop and eat *first*? You caused me to work up an appetite I have to admit. And were you screwing with me on the circuit breaker business? Why would you need *No 12 cut*, when all the power to the whole shebang is *already* cut?”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Pike said, “we wriggled out of it.”

Heidi said, still half turned around toward Pike, “I believe you are understating the result. From what I observed . . . you did quite a bit *more* than wriggle out of it.” It sounded like a bit of a humm at the end of her delivery, and Pike looked at Heidi more closely, and she had that pose like someone who was suddenly interested in you again, and you weren’t sure how you felt about it.

Separately, Pike wondered had she seen anything--the main part, the business with wrecking the guy’s blade. Pike was pretty sure she couldn’t have,

meaning her apparent awestruck-ness was based on him holding the guy up with the one hand and windmilling him around up there a bit.

Which wouldn't be something a person would *ordinarily* observe happening--fine--but it wasn't out of the realm of possibility, was it? Considering how adrenaline can work when you're under duress?

Back to the first part though, if Heidi was shifting her . . . allegiance . . . back toward Pike after all, that could be confusing. It *had* been exciting, initially, to connect with an older female--especially a full-fledged college one--but the reality was, her over the top intellect could wear you out . . . and it was a relief actually when she mostly disappeared with Jack yesterday.

Pike said now, "Let's not make a big deal about it. All in day's work, right Hannamaker?"

"Yeah, right," Jack said, and as usual you couldn't read the guy.

"What was the giant machine though, if I might ask?" Heidi said.

"Oh," Pike said. "That's a whatchamacall, not a compressor, but . . ."

"A *generator*, or some shit?" Jack said.

"There you go," Pike said, and to Heidi: "You see--and not sure if you guys had the fires in Arizona like we did . . ."

"Fires?" she said.

"Not forest fires, what's the word they use, Jeez I'm drawing a blank . . ."

"*Wildfires*," Jack said. "You want to get some coffee? Unlike you to draw blanks."

Pike would have said something off-color to the guy, half-joking, half-not, except Heidi was in the truck. He said, "3, 4 years now, we have to go through that stuff the end of the summer. Even September and October. This year it got worse, not the fires but the power company cutting everyone off."

"Precautionary, they called it," Jack said. "That really started pissing me off."

"Me too," Pike said. "Anyways . . . my dad, it's the final straw for him *too* he says. He can handle being evacuated, which we've been through a couple

times, though they may be overreacting since that last one you couldn't see any fire or even smell anything."

"The wind shifting, they're worried about," Jack said.

Pike said, "Okay. The point being forget *those*, my dad thinks the random power shutoffs are gonna get worse."

"What's the science incorporated in that decision-making process?" Heidi said.

Jack gave Pike a look over his shoulder, another of those is she for *real* ones and Pike gave him a subtle look back, like you tell *me*. Pike said, "I guess what they're afraid of, the equipment can spark *new* fires."

"Not the home stuff or the wires running through town," Jack said, "so much as the big transformers and such, up in the hills."

"Without getting too technical," Pike said, "the junk that controls Beacon, it's all the way up by Muscatel . . . So they cut us off, cause they're worried about an old sub-station functioning bad 20 miles away. Unlikely I'd know any of this, but they made us write a paper on it."

"Gosh," Heidi said, and Pike realized with some alarm that she might be putting it together, that that typically wouldn't be a college assignment would it, and he'd forgotten all about supposing to be *in* one.

"*Last year*," Jack said, picking up on it and hopefully sort of bailing him out, "I remember that, I had to do the same thing."

"Unh-huh," Pike said and cleared his throat. "Lemme get back on track. Bottom line, my dad had a generator installed in the side yard. Not one of those gasoline-powered jobs that you pull around on the little wheels, but a serious machine."

"Runs on natural gas then?" Jack said.

"Yeah, I think so. I know my dad needed a plumber and electrician both. The way it's supposed to work, the instant the power goes out, the thing kicks on."

"I see," Jack said, processing better now what was actually going *on* there at 3:30 in the morning. "What about the jackhammer part though?"

“Yes,” Heidi said, “what about *that*?”

“I, kind of winged it,” Pike said.

Jack said, “Ah. Throwing ‘em a knuckleball . . . Keeping ‘em off balance.”

“Something like that I guess,” Pike said.

“The vastness of the unknown,” Heidi said, an odd dramatic flourish to it--and once again Jack and Pike exchanged glances.

They took care of business at Walmart, which consisted of getting a new lock for the outside entrance to the basement--and two keys total this time, no exceptions, Jack and Pike nodded their heads vigorously on that point at the checkout counter, and Heidi added a comment that you wouldn't have expected from her, that they looked like a couple of bobblehead dolls.

They swung by Home Depot which had just opened and picked up a half piece of sheetrock to repair Jack's earlier damage, and the necessary compound and paint to finish it off. Then even Heidi agreed she was pretty hungry and there was a Black Bear Diner over the freeway and Jack to his credit--though also because it was a no-brainer--picked up everyone's check.

On the way home Pike's phone buzzed and it was Mitch, and this probably wasn't going to be the greatest, and Pike ignored it until they got back, and Jack said he'd take care of the lock and Pike said what about the hole in The Box, and Jack said how about this weekend and Pike didn't say anything and Jack got the idea and said he'd handle it all back to back.

Meanwhile Heidi asked Pike what he was feeling about *today*--and she was sitting in back with him now on the return trip--and Pike said he wasn't *sure* but he'd have to spend some time on something *first*, and Heidi seemed disappointed but said that was fine, she'd watch Jack address his repairs.

So they got back and Jack went to work and Pike excused himself and took a walk, and it was a nice crisp morning and you didn't feel like breaking up the mood, but 6 blocks in he called Mitch back.

Chapter 21

“Okay here’s what I produced,” Mitch said.

He sounded more business-like than normal. Pike said, “When you go in straight-to-the-point mode on me, I get nervous.”

“Well, son--maybe you *should* be. It’s not for me to judge.”

“Okay that’s a croc,” Pike said. “You can’t be passing the buck on me here.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Mitch said. “It does appear we have a situation on our hands. Not a hypothetical, or an *incidental* anymore. But the real *deal*.”

“Oh,” Pike said. And you weren’t going to have to ask the guy now, Pike felt it coming, Mitch was going deliver the goods no matter what.

You could hear Mitch flipping open a notebook. He said, “We got five . . . Are you listening carefully? Sitting down?”

“If you insist,” Pike said, and he kept walking, though him enjoying the nice brisk conditions was over.

“Number 1, we have Matthew Holleran, age 47, Cheyenne, Wyoming . . . Kidney.”

Pike said, “Actually can you email me these? I’m not gonna write them down.”

“Sure can,” Mitch said. “Number 2, Alberto Johnstone, age 66, Sparta, Tennessee . . . Liver.”

“No heart?” Pike said. He was starting to get a little queasy, for a lot of reasons. Keeping it light might help, in a weird way, though probably not.

“Unfortunately no,” Mitch said. “According to Erline there was damage . . . resulting from the incident.”

“Oh then,” Pike said.

“How many’s that . . . okay Number 3, Mike Hegan, 71, Linden, New Jersey . . . Lung.”

“Jeeminy Christmas,” Pike said.

“Yeah. Number 4, Robert Orancheck, age 32, Springfield, Illinois . . . Pancreas.”

“Ooh boy.”

“5th and final recipient,” Mitch said, “Treat Willamette, age 53, Warwick, Rhode Island . . . Intestine.”

It was unfair to these recipients--or *any* recipients--to react this way, but Pike couldn’t help it, by now he really *was* on the edge of throwing up his breakfast. He fiddled around in his pockets and he found some gum and stuck in a wad of it and that helped.

“So there you have it laid out,” Mitch was saying. “Any questions so far?”

“Why do you *ask* me something like that,” Pike said, “when I know you’re just getting warmed up. And are going to dump a whole lot more on me. Aren’t you.”

“We can wait,” Mitch said. “At least temporarily.”

“Except that . . . what you’re slowly but surely telling me . . . is not *really*.”

“You got me *there* kid, I’m not going to lie to you.”

“Continue,” Pike said. He was sitting down now, there was a sidewalk bench on Peach Street near the mini golf place that went out of business and was now batting cages, and there was a middle-aged woman on other side of the bench, but she looked sufficiently pre-occupied that she wasn’t going to follow along.

“All righty. Now if you remember back a ways--in fact you told me this, the skeleton details anyway--the first incident that prompted us to raise an eyebrow was a gentleman going out of control in the crowd at an airshow in Ohio . . . That one it turns out was Mr. Willamette.”

“The last one? The Rhode Island guy?”

“Correct.”

“Wow. All the way out *there*. What was he doing in Ohio?”

“That’s a fair question, and I’m not sure.”

“You’re not *sure*?” Pike said. “Well don’t you think that’s an incomplete job you’re doing then? How do we judge *any* of this nonsense, if we can’t even get our *facts* straight? I mean, come *on*.”

Mitch kept quiet, and after a minute Pike said, “Hey I’m sorry, that’s on me.”

“Don’t mention it,” Mitch said. “Perfectly understandable. And I *will* try to find out.”

“That’s okay,” Pike said. “You’re right, the bottom line, who cares, probably, why he was there . . . that’s the one, the guy gets arrested, right? Making threats?”

Mitch said, “A bit *more* than that unfortunately. He beat up some of the air show watchers. Their injuries were significant. Everyone has since recovered, thank God. Mr. Willamette had what was interpreted as a psychotic break. What’s more, he was difficult to subdue, is the report I got. It took several security guards and some state troopers to restrain him and apprehend him.”

Pike and Mitch both knew what this meant, that a weird yet familiar strength component apparently surfaced in the guy, which unfortunately had to have emanated from Don, the cop--either the organ *itself*, or his blood, or whatever the heck . . . and there was no need to go into it, really.

What you *did* know, was that’d be a bad combination. The strength business combined with a guy going slightly nuts.

“Willamette was then charged with attempted manslaughter and placed in protective custody while awaiting trial,” Mitch said.

“Back it up for just a second,” Pike said. “This guy . . . was there any, like, previous stuff?”

“On his record? Not a thing. He’s a blue collar guy, hard worker, spent a dozen years on a spearfishing rig. Guy was happily married, over 20 years, now the wife’s afraid of him, she’s staying away.”

“*Away* . . . you mean, he’s back on the loose?”

“Halfway house. He was ruled incompetent to stand trial. The court system works in funny ways. In the old days he’d probably be confined to a mental health facility. Now it’s not as strict, to say the least.”

Pike was putting it together in his head, that this *airshow* guy was the one who got into trouble in Ohio, not some guy at a *mall*, the way Pike remembered it. So that didn’t matter, that detail--but what *did* matter was the result was amped up beyond what Pike had thought--that this guy legitimately went *after* some people, that it wasn’t just threats.

Pike said to Mitch, “Okay, my friend Dani . . . speaking to her recently . . . she ticks me off, because she doesn’t give me a direct answer, she tends to tease around the subject . . . but I asked her had there been any more . . . wrong activity . . . that she picked up from her friend Erline, and she indicated yeah there has.”

“There has,” Mitch said. “Quite a *bit* in fact.”

At this point Pike cut Mitch off, told him he better be at the computer if Mitch was going to be laying a whole lot more on him, if he intended to keep stuff straight.

“Good idea,” Mitch said, and Pike went back home and by this time Jack had finished the lock and Pike tried his new key and it worked nicely, and dang, the guy worked fast, he had the sheetrock patched too and the joint compound was drying and you couldn’t paint it until that dried, and Jack and Heidi had apparently taken off someplace and that was fine.

Pike went upstairs and squared himself away at his desk and got back to Mitch, and Mitch said, “K now. Update No 1 is--”

“Hang on. How many total updates do we got here?”

“4.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Why would I *kid*. We have Mr. Willamette, and we have the other 4 . . . We technically have 5, but I’ve already briefed you on the Missoula, Montana, case. So we’ll set that one aside.”

Pike took a second. “Part of me wonders,” he said, “how a lot of this might have turned out differently--my *own* business included--if you weren’t such a dang picky researcher.”

Mitch laughed a little but he didn’t have his heart in it, and it was clear he wanted to outline the rest of the updates. “So again, No 1,” he said. “What happened there, he behaved normally for a while, by all accounts, until--”

“You know what?” Pike said. “Those, like *summary* deals, where it’s all lumped together real simple? And brief? Just go with one of those.”

Mitch said, “An abstract I believe is what you’re referring to. Essentially an *acute* summary, such as when a politician gives a lengthy speech.”

“I’m thinking more like Cliff Notes. We had to read *The Grapes of Wrath*, and I’m not ashamed to tell you I took the easy way out.”

“You used the condensed chapters version, or the three-page summary?”

“The short chapters . . . you’re telling me there’s *less* I could read? To get enough of the idea?”

“Absolutely,” Mitch said. “In my youth--and you know I walked on as a wide receiver at Michigan State. Though of course naturally, ball was a lot different back then.”

“So you said,” Pike said, and he wasn’t sure even the *first* time he believed the guy, not that it mattered. “But get back to the *point*.”

“Only that I was busy and relied on the late-night C Notes many times, to maintain my eligibility.”

“Come on, what’s wrong with you, why you need to keep *going*? . . . Give me the bottom line. Leave out the who and when, and most of the whats.”

“If that’s your preference,” Mitch said, and he was adjusting his paperwork again. “The conclusion, if I were pressed to establish one--all four of the other recipients have had issues. Internal ones.”

Pike said, “See now, you use the word *internal*--is that, like, the *transplant* not working entirely right--or internal, meaning *brain*.”

“Brain.”

“So just say so, don’t get fancy on me . . . Jeez . . . Fine, you better give me a few *whats*.”

“All right, lets see . . . One with a domestic abuse call, following 30 years of marital bliss.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. I mean it’s not good, obviously, but people get those who *aren’t* alien-transplanted. Or whatever the hell might be going on here.”

“You’re right. But the call led to an assault on the responding officers, and an attempted attack on a bailiff in the subsequent court hearing.”

“Oh,” Pike said. “What else?”

“One with an attempted kidnapping charge. There was a family gathering, as in a backyard barbeque, and when people were distracted enough he took his 6-year old nephew to an amusement park without telling anyone. The family freaked out of course, but charges were later dismissed. The sticking point there though, they’re all afraid of him now. Not just from the one incident. They’ve got restraining orders in.”

“Uhm. What else?”

“One with--”

“Please stop saying *one*. You’re getting on my nerves with that, bad.”

Mitch restarted. “There was a bird calling contest.”

“A what? . . . Forget it, keep going.”

“More common a generation ago, perhaps. Contestants recreate bird sounds orally. The more difficult renditions typically earn more points on the judges’ scorecards . . . but let me finish. *Our* gentleman, he enters the competition, completes his performance, and comes in 3rd.”

“Out of how many?”

“That’s the thing, there were 25 finalists, whittled down from over a hundred earlier applicants.”

“*Then* what?” Pike said, since *something* was coming, obviously.

“He receives his 3rd place ribbon and jumps up on stage challenging the judges. There was one specific one who rubbed him the wrong way. Later that

night he goes on social media and threatens that judge's life . . . Then you had the FBI involved and so forth."

"They picked him *up* then, or whatever they do?"

"They may have. Briefly. The talking point here--this guy was by all accounts a wholly gentle soul. In fact he'd been entering bird contests for years, and this was by far his strongest finish."

"One more," Pike said.

"Yes. Unfortunately--or perhaps fortunately--this gentleman is incarcerated at the moment. Pending charges and presumptive trial. A workplace incident, like we all-too-commonly read about in the news these days, though luckily it didn't quite materialize. He brought a weapon to work one day--a sawed off shotgun--and didn't point it at anyone but threatened the supervisor who laid him off."

"Oh."

"The *extra*-concerning part--if that's possible--is he *hadn't* been laid off . . . This incident, it's fresh."

"How fresh?"

"Last Thursday morning. "

Pike took a hard breath. He said, "So . . . like, another . . . psychotic break type deal . . . like the Ohio thing?"

"The airshow situation," Mitch said, "I'm afraid that's correct."

No one said anything for a couple minutes. Pike subscribed to a guy's channel on YouTube who made woodworking videos, and he noticed a new one came in, and he half-heartedly opened it and watched for a bit with the sound off.

Finally he said to Mitch, "Anyone . . . you know . . . slip through the cracks? And *nothing* went wrong?"

"Not that I've discovered, and I've been pretty thorough in my dealings with Erline, and another source as well."

"So you're sure. *No* one else, received, a body part--that we don't know about?"

“I’m afraid not son.”

“Umm . . . And these 5 . . . okay 6 with the Montana one--*any* of them act bad in the past? *Anything* going on there?”

“I’ve only picked up one prior incident. One of the gentleman--he’d been pulled over for speeding--talked back a bit too much for the officer’s taste that day, and it led to the man being booked, temporarily . . . This was a couple decades ago.”

“Oh,” Pike said . . . and that about wrapped it up, didn’t it.

Not what you wanted to hear today. Or tonight. None of it.

Chapter 22

With all that had gone down since then, it was hard to believe it was only last July--Independence Day to be exact--that Don Pascarella was ambushed and gunned down in that housing project in Yonkers, New York, 20 miles from midtown Manhattan.

Dani had given Pike the basics some time ago but he didn't pay real close attention. His deal at that point was more, is this *another* guy connected to *my* issue. That of course applied to Dani, and also the guy whose brother was the trucker, who Pike met with that time. That guy, like Don, unfortunately had passed away--in the army, fighting in Afghanistan.

Pike remembered the trucker delivering that eerie comment, on behalf of his brother . . . that aliens messed with his teeth.

Either way, this time he'd gotten it straight from Mitch--the who, what, when of what happened to Officer Pascarella, and it more or less jibed with Dani's version, and bottom line, the date was definitely correct. Pike made sure of that himself now, looking up the incident in the online archive of the New York Post.

It was an old-fashioned no-brainer at this point wasn't it. You hated to be involved--this was much more unpleasant, not to mention likely more dangerous--than straightening out Eva's thing. But however Pike tried to poke holes in these increasing developments, it was hard to find one.

Even if *one* guy was better off and living a normal life and *not* getting in any trouble--as a result of Don giving him an organ--you'd have to think twice about trying to undo it. You'd sort of be playing God then, wouldn't you?

But there *wasn't* one guy better off . . . they were *all* screwed up in some new significant way, weren't they, as a result . . . on top of which, you had *Don* dead, who hadn't deserved it.

So you did what you had to do . . .

The most comfortable initiation location, hands-down, was the custodian's closet outside the football locker room at Hamilton. It was barebones, you were on a cement floor, you were dealing with the pretty heavy smell of various disinfectants lingering on mops and rags, but it had always done the job. For the most part.

So . . . what did we have, 11:40 on Friday . . . Jack and Heidi still off doing whatever, no need to be texting anyone right now . . . and Pike gathered his thoughts. First of all it could be cold back there, on the east coast . . . second, you needed plenty of cash this time, the Idaho episode where you were worried about that the whole time was ridiculous. Anything else? There almost certainly was, but now that he was on it, Pike wanted to wrap this up as quickly as possible, and if he didn't think of it right away it probably wasn't that important.

The arrival location of course, and date . . . those did matter, and Pike went back to the NY Post archive and July 3rd, conveniently just a day before, there'd been a tanker truck explosion on the Major Deegan Expressway--which the article told you ran north/south out of Manhattan and Gee, all the way up to Montreal, but this accident happened in the Bronx, near 257th Street.

Explosion was the wrong word, as he read the NY Post article from July 3rd more carefully--it was one of those toxic spills, caused by a chain-reaction collision of 3 semi-tractor trucks--the result of which messed everyone up trying to use the Major Deegan that day and caused the big news item, that the particular stretch of highway was completely closed to traffic northbound for 9 hours. They had to import federal workers it said, to clean it all up under strict Osha guidelines.

So you focus on *that*. You try, anyway. You don't focus on the roadway, God forbid, just the time frame. For the location, Pike reviewed what Yonkers was all about, it was settled by the Dutch and the name sort of stuck, modified

from Jankeers, and they had an old plaza centrally located in a downtown which had been facelifted and now even offered ferry service to New York City down the Hudson River. That was Getty Square and Pike would shoot for that.

He found a parka in his dad's closet . . . and then thought what's the *matter* with me, it's going to be *summer* back there, and those tended to be hot and humid, didn't they? . . . That is of course, if I'm lucky enough to *make* it back there, and get the timing right.

While he was at it though, he checked his dad's counter for any loose cash--since why not, it had worked once before--but there wasn't any, so on the way to Hamilton he hit the cash machine for 200 bucks, figuring you leave a little in there, though when he got the receipt showing a \$12 balance after the withdrawal that had been a little optimistic.

With school getting ready to reopen Monday after Christmas break you'd think it would be a little busier at Hamilton, but the place was dead to the world, and the second guessing crept in, what was the best plan B location if he couldn't get in the building at all--but good old Julio was painting a first floor hallway and that door was open, and after a few pleasantries Julio asked what he was doing, why would he come to back early in a million years--and Pike said he wasn't sure . . . and Julio laughed a little, but you could tell he didn't like such a simple answer . . . but fortunately the guy had a job to do and he took pride in his work and he went back to it.

The closet was open, though another custodian, Jackson, was on the premises as well, and Pike figured don't fool around, except he had to move some stuff, just to carve out enough room on the floor. Big green garbage bags jammed full of what smelled like outdoor clippings, and why they ended up in here would be a question mark, but Pike's main concern was not doing too much rearranging where someone starts wondering . . . and after all that concern it was surprisingly easy--routine almost--he got his legs folded, covered his face with his hands, his could feel his breathing slowing down . . . the focus on the toxic spill on the Major Deegan, the massive traffic jam-up, sustaining July 3rd 2016 like a flashing light inside his forehead . . . and Yonkers, that plaza, the

Dutch element, the history . . . and a stillness took over, followed by the bits and pieces of spinning, different each time, but doing the job . . .

And there was the sound of hoofs on a hard surface, like the cowboy movies he enjoyed as a kid where they *over*-microphoned the horses for effect . . . and Pike opened his eyes and it was scratchy underneath him and there were some patches of dirty snow that hadn't melted all the way.

He was lying in weeds, he figured out quick enough, and coming toward him down the road was a horse and buggy deal, looked like a kid driving it, maybe 14 years old, and some more folks in back, on a high seat, and they were all wearing floppy black garb over white shirts and blouses and were overall pretty dang covered up. The men had suspenders, you could tell, and everyone was wearing hats.

Pike thought for just a *moment*, until he came his senses, that he ended up in the 19th *century* someplace . . . and that you *see*, Mitch was *wrong* about the 1956 limitation, because Holy Mackerel look where I *am*.

Then he started putting it together, that this was a real road, not a fancy one or busy one but a real *asphalt* one . . . and that alone would advance the time frame considerably . . . and putting the other aspect together, these people were part of that religious group, most of them farmers he was thinking, who do everything the old fashioned way, without modern machines. Pike couldn't recall their name but he placed it later, the Amish.

And of course he remembered enough from some history class that the Amish were known as the Pennsylvania Dutch.

And Holy Smokes--is *that* what I caused? Could I have *over-focused* on Yonkers being originally a Dutch town, and this is what I *get*?

Pike was thinking now, why did I have to get *fancy* here . . . what would have been wrong with focusing on New York City itself, and the Empire *State* Building for crying out loud?

Highly unlikely you could have gone too far haywire handling it that way.

But whatever, you had to establish the *date* at least, and the buggy was coming up on him, and it didn't seem appropriate to stop these people and ask a

question--much less *that* one--but enough was enough and as they passed Pike went ahead and called out to the kid in front holding the reins, "Hey is this July 3rd, 2016?" And the buggy passed and no one responded, except the kid turned toward Pike just a touch, it was almost imperceptible, but Pike could pick up the kid nodding that it was.

So that was good--not that you were 100 percent convinced but you'd go with it until proven otherwise--and now the question was how the heck do you get out of *Pennsylvania*. Pike realized that Gee, he may have landed in Ohio or Indiana or one of those states too, since he was pretty sure the Amish population extended east . . . but five minutes later a regular car came by, and it did have a Pennsylvania plate, and the guy stops and rolls down the passenger window and asks Pike if he needs help.

That's the way it was in these rural communities, wasn't it, that it would be unusual for someone *not* to stop.

Pike was in luck, the guy didn't ask too many questions, and it turned out they were outside of a town called Bausman, in Lancaster County, and that's where the guy was headed, and he dropped Pike in front of a feed store where he said there was a bus three times a day to Lancaster, and from there you'd be on your way wherever else you needed to be.

Pike thanked the guy, and he got the point about the bus, but he sure didn't feel like figuring out any schedule much less waiting around for one . . . and there was a gas station up the street and you might as well try hanging around *there*, and a few minutes later he got a ride from an older gal who was headed to Lancaster--her once a week stock-up shopping excursion she said, though her driving made him pretty nervous on these two-lane roads, but an hour and a half later she got him there okay.

Now . . . what would be your best bet . . . and Pike found a map in a convenience store and it looked like 3 hours driving to Yonkers, and you weren't going to find anyone from here going there, that would be a needle in a haystack. There was a train though, he found out, not a local deal but Amtrak itself . . . and dang, 141 miles station to station but over 5 hours travel time and \$56 dollars.

Ooh boy. Pike asked the counter guy to please check the schedule, and there was one tonight, but there was also one leaving in about 20 minutes, and Pike asked where, and the guy pointed, and Pike was out the door . . . jogging at first, then picking up speed, no idea how far the station was but it felt like you were close enough to the center of town that you had a shot at it.

Meanwhile this *running* for stuff was getting real, *real* old . . . but Pike knew he *could* turn on the real jets if he had to and make it, the consideration being don't attract attention while doing it.

He entered a residential neighborhood, and then there was Lancaster Catholic High School he was coming up on, and on the other side of that you could feel some railroad activity across what looked like Route 501 and off to the right . . . and his instincts this time were good, and he spotted the old brick station with the three long half-moon shaped windows in the front facade, that a lot of similar old structures tended to have . . . and the train was sitting there on the platform when he got there, and who knows how long that'll be *for*, so Pike got right on.

Of course there was a 20 dollar surcharge for not buying your ticket at the station, so boom, *that* didn't take much, his wallet was half empty before he got started. But at least you were going in the right direction, though you'd be getting in late . . . and Pike reminded himself next time don't cut this stuff so close, give yourself time in case something goes *wrong* . . . but he was sure hoping there wouldn't *be* a next time.

Chapter 23

On July 4th Don and his partner Otto were working the 4 to midnight shift. Don didn't like working holidays period. But nighttime could be extra dicey, with people's frustrations coming out and the extra festivities developing.

The previous 4th of July for example, Don and Otto handled a call where one guy threw his brother-in-law out the window, and it boiled down to an argument about firecrackers.

This time it was tame enough, they were mostly patrolling, not many calls, and all of them minor so far, and Don was hoping that was a good omen. But then they *get* the particular call, the projects on Nepperhan Avenue, south Yonkers, a 415F, which typically is a family dispute.

A little guy opened the door and it still seemed okay, and as Otto asked the guy some questions trying to piece together who was *what* here, Don took a look at the rest of the apartment, and someone fired a blast through one of the bedroom doors and killed him.

Not on the spot of course, Don lasted 9 days, beyond what any of the doctors predicted--which was that he shouldn't have even *made* it to the hospital.

Pike figured it was at least partly because he was a very tough guy, fighting with everything he had . . . but partly obviously, because he'd been empowered. Like Pike. And Dani. And the trucker's brother. And whoever else.

So Pike *had* taken the time back home to look up the incident, review it, catch the follow-ups.

They'd arrested the mutant that night without incident--a Willis Roseboro, 27, an unemployed cement-worker. The courts seemed to act pretty quickly and efficiently in Westchester County, and by the end of September with a jury

selected and ready to go, Roseboro pled guilty and was sentenced to 18 to 25 years at Attica Correctional Facility, avoiding the likely 25 to life outcome of a trial.

Fine. The aftermath was clear, that wasn't the problem. And like a lot of these trips were boiling down to--not real complicated--you had a couple ways to go.

Did you stop the thing from *happening*--or *try* to anyway--or did you stop the guy from *being* there, so it *wouldn't* happen?

That was a muddled thought . . . but applied to Don's deal . . . did you stop Roseboro? Like intercept him earlier in the day, don't let him be there when Don and Otto show up?

Or how about this one--you cause some kind of *other* disturbance at that location at that same *time*, and Don and Otto get sidetracked and don't enter the apartment right away, or at *all*.

Or--how about *this* angle, if all else fails--you stop *Erline* from donating the poor guy's organs.

Oooh man.

The train was passing through New Jersey and Pike was plenty comfortable and you could pull a lever on your seat and put your feet up, but he had a headache coming on, partly because of ridiculous ideas like those last couple he just came up.

You stick to the obvious, he reminded himself, you go with what has at least a semblance of a track record. You don't go outside the box and reinvent the wheel.

Meaning the *second* option, stop Don from being there, *period*.

Pike wasn't sure why, it wasn't something you pinpointed, but that *seemed* the most reasonable . . . Maybe the *safest* too, you don't want to ignore that part.

The train was an hour late, so closer to six hours. Pike had this experience before once on Amtrak going to Reno for an 8th grade weekend field trip--the thing just stopped in the middle of *nowhere* for no reason. No announcements, no other trains which might be interfering--zippo. So you dealt with it. Pike was

thinking what if you commuted to work on these things, like a lot of folks do back here--how would it be to have that happen frequently? This only reinforced Pike's vision that when the time came to actually earn *money*, he was going work for himself--or at least don't get trapped against your will.

Either way they were here now, Yonkers Station, and Pike grabbed his coat and climbed down and took a couple steps and thought--you know *what*?

And he got back on. What'd we have . . . 8:15? You had about 24 hours until the . . . *incident* . . .but more importantly, where were you going to sleep tonight--and more acutely--why did you need to sleep *anywhere* tonight?

So he asked one of the passengers who *hadn't* gotten off, what next, direction-wise--and the guy told him well, *ultimate* direction-wise--after a complicated sounding change-over that Pike didn't want to hear all about--it'd be Chicago.

The guy pulled out a little brochure with schedules and such, and Pike realized they gave him the same brochure when he boarded, and he thanked the guy and found his seat again and the schedule was in the pocket--and Gee . . . loosely calculating it all out . . . it looked like first of all this thing sat for a few hours before going *anywhere*, which was fine . . . and then you could get off in Albany, and it wouldn't be light by then, but good enough, you *mostly* the killed the night off--and then get back on one the other way in time to properly address the Don thing. If there ever *was* a proper way.

So that's what he did, and like he was hoping, the conductor didn't bother him, since Pike faked being asleep when the guy came by collecting tickets from new passengers--and it wasn't a bad ride at all, he got some actual sleep, and when he woke up Pike headed to the lounge car, and there was plenty of action in *there*, people laughing, having fun, even dancing to someone's Ipad, though the music was topheavy that old 70's stuff that Pike couldn't relate to.

It was a bit more dicey coming back, some serious time on a bench in the station in Albany reading a couple Sports Illustrateds that were laying around, and then an announcement that the return train had a *connection* issue--whatever the heck *that* meant--and Pike started to panic. Not full-fledged panic,

you weren't there quite yet--but it was a relief when the train did show up at 4:45 in the morning and you pulled into Yonkers station--for real this time--at just under 7:30.

Mitch--for all the trash talking Pike gave him--was pretty darn thorough when he put his mind to it, and he'd come up with Don and Erline's address, which Pike had in his pocket and was checking out now.

He was also ravenous--he'd avoided the return fare by walking around between cars after he got on when you figured the conductor would be doing his thing, and then when he finally did sit down the guy either accidentally let him go or had better things to do.

But that said, he dropped 25 bucks in a hurry in that lounge car. It was mostly snacks but they were pricey and he gobbled them up.

Downtown Yonkers--at least the early morning version--had undergone a facelift, you could tell that, but there was a seedy underbelly to the place, where you felt like what was there *before* what they were trying to replace was still poking through . . . Kind of like, Pike was thinking, you splash cologne on a guy who hasn't taken a shower.

It was also the 4th of July of course, so it wouldn't be business as usual.

The good part of what looked like was there before were several pizza stands, none of them open though unfortunately, though one guy was sweeping the sidewalk out front, and Pike asked the guy if he knew where Gliver Street was, and the guy got real serious and said *he* lived in that neighborhood, and what do you want to *know* for.

Pike wasn't sure what to say, and then the guy released his scowl and it was all a joke and Pike sort of nervously laughed it off, the guy did have him going there. *Rough* looking guy too, heavy-duty New York accent, someone who had a few stories in him for sure.

And definitely Italian, and if you brought Don Pascarella up to the guy, who knows, Yonkers wasn't that big a place was it, maybe he really *would* know the guy . . . and he could help you, shed some light, indirectly give you an idea? . . . Nah, awful concept Pike realized, would backfire all around.

So leaving it alone, he got directions from the guy--there was a bus that went up Warburton Avenue and then you could walk it over the top of the hill, the guy said, which'd be your best bet--and Pike asked if he happened to be open for business yet and the guy said not yet, in fact not at *all*, it's the 4th--but his buddy would be by the time he got up there, on Roberts, that *that* guy was always open, even holidays.

So that part went fine, when he got there he stuffed his face--a couple slices and a baked ziti--Pike thinking *a*, train rides made you hungry, and *b*, we need more joints like this in California, but *c*, the only *important* part . . . what *now*.

Bottom line, you better find Don somehow, otherwise *what now* is going to be a real moot point.

Gliver Street was a dead end cul-de-sac with an extra loop in it, at the top of Wardell Avenue where it looked like the road used to go through but they cut it off to make a business park on the other side.

No 29 was at the end where it started to curve. The neighborhood was mostly 2-family houses, and you could tell it was all one big development once. The houses were well-maintained and some had added ornate ironwork fences and gates and a couple had marble steps. Don's was one of those, not a speck of anything out of the place in the exterior and you assumed there'd be many meticulous upgrades inside as well.

There were kids out riding bikes and skateboarding and few were slamming around hockey pucks, and American flags were all over the place and you had that early 4th feel where fireworks were just starting to go off here and there.

What it looked like, the owners typically lived on the first floor, since that gave them access to the backyard, and they rented out the upstairs apartment. Not a bad idea, that could help a lot.

Mitch had done his homework there too, coming up with Don being the owner, not the renter, and owning the place since 2009.

By the time Pike walked the long block to 29 he was as familiar with neighborhood as you needed to be. Now you just needed the guy *home*.

Pike steadied his nerve and rang the bell. Nothing . . . He tried it again, and nope . . . As a final effort he banged on the door with the side of his fist. Pretty hard.

An irritated-looking man came around the side of the house and opened the gate and said, “Yo *brother*. What’s *up*, you need me so bad?”

It was interesting putting the real guy together with the image after all this time--in fact Pike couldn’t help it, it kind of blew his mind.

But you had to stick to business, and he said, “You *garden*, this time of *year*?”

The guy looked at Pike like he was crazy, and Pike was embarrassed, like he was having a senior moment you read about with old people--and why *wouldn’t* someone garden in the middle of summer . . . since it wasn’t exactly December right now.

Pike was trying to make conversation, but that came out way wrong.

But Don helped him out. “Today, you mean? Why, I’m in your *way*?” He was friendly, he had a warm smile, he reminded Pike a little of the guy sweeping the front of the pizza place, but a little softer.

“Well sorry to *catch* you then,” Pike said. “I dunno, I was just . . . it seemed like a good day to . . . my parents are looking to move, and I was checking out neighborhoods. Why *not*, right?”

“Absolutely,” Don said. “Don’t do nothing without minding your p’s and q’s. To the *hilt*, I’m saying. Your folks tol’ you I’m sure, you buy a *house*, that’s the most important move of your life.”

“Big financial risk,” Pike said.

“Not *risk*, no. Long as you don’t do nothing rash.”

“Wrong word then,” Pike said.

“You’re right in a way though,” Don said, “you buy *investment* property, you speculate--then you *are* opening the risk bucket.”

Pike wasn't sure where he was going but he wanted to keep the conversation alive. "How much difference--would you say--having the extra apartment makes?"

"My *tenants*? Them's good people. We lucked out. And sure, that'll pay your taxes at *least*."

"Ah."

Don said, "You're not from around here, you don't mind me asking."

"California," Pike said. What else could you say.

Don studied him. "Well then, I give you credit, helping your parents. We ain't got enough of that, frankly."

Pike knew Don could have asked him more questions, cut right through the BS, but he left him alone, which Pike admired.

Don said, "I'll show you my tomatoes. I got 3 varieties. Lot of work though maintaining em'. Your family might reconsider based on that alone." He gave Pike a wink and pointed to the back yard and Pike followed him. This was a nice man. This was going to be rough.

Don had a lot more crops than just tomatoes back there and most of the space was taken up by raised beds. There was an elaborate looking drip system and even the deck coming off the house was full of stuff growing.

"You have a green thumb," Pike said.

Just then there was another bang on the door, and Don looked at Pike and rolled his eyes, like what is going *on* today, and they went back to the front and there was a middle-aged guy standing there sticking out his hand.

"Mike Keegan," the guy said. Big grin.

Pike felt ice cold water sloshing around in his arteries. One of *Mitch's* guys--the *transplant* people--was Mike *Hegan*.

Not the same--the guy had definitely pronounced it Keegan.

So in any other circumstance that would be a simple coincidence.

But not here.

Pike knew, not *here*.

Mike Keegan was explaining to Don that he was just moving into the neighborhood, and as Pike glanced back down Gliver Street there was a rental U-Haul there, that hadn't been a few minutes ago when he walked past.

Mike was a gregarious guy, talking a mile a minute, jumping around from one thing to the next.

The bottom line was, he could use a hand, if possible, in getting an awkward couch inside and up the stairs.

Don looked at his watch. It was after 2 by now, and you figured if he was working 4 to midnight that would mean getting to work, maybe 3:45 at the latest . . . so leaving here by 3:30. If Mitch had it right, Don worked out of the precinct house on Tuckahoe Road, and Pike had checked it out, it was 12 minutes give or take from Don's house.

Don was a little reluctant but you could tell he was the kind of guy who would help a neighbor out, so they headed down there, the three of them.

Don said hi to about 5 people on the way, no surprise. Pike of course was thinking, this Mike Keegan--with a bunch of other people around, closer to the house he was moving into--why go all way to the *end* of the block to ask Don to help?

Though Pike unfortunately was pretty sure he knew the answer. He didn't know why, but just that this stuff *happened*.

The back of the truck was open and there was other furniture and all kinds of boxes but Pike could see the guy's point, the one item you definitely needed help with was this couch. It was one of those over-stuffed jobs you saw at Costco sometimes, where admittedly you really did sink into the thing and didn't want to get back up.

Mike said he'd show them around the apartment first, why not, before it got cluttered up with furnishings. That wasn't as weird as it sounded, since when Mike Keegan introduced himself, Pike introduced *himself* as looking around the neighborhood.

So Don kind of shrugged and went along with it, and the three of them went tromping up the stairs, and the apartment wasn't bad at all, a little small,

but a nice layout, three bedrooms. Plus a decent view, looking out toward the Hudson River, Pike was placing it, though you couldn't see the river *itself* but you could see what was on the other side, and it was a lot of open area, mostly woods, sort of hard to believe this close to New York City.

Anyhow the guy asked Don a question about the washing machine that was in the kitchen--he said the landlord told him that part was *as is*, that he'd have to maintain it himself if something went wrong. It was one of those economy stack-jobs, and this seemed kind of rude, but you could tell Don was into it and he was obviously mechanical and he asked the guy for a screwdriver and opened a front panel and started looking around in there.

Some time went by, and the guy told a story, and before you knew it it was quarter to 3 . . . and Pike knew Don didn't have that much time, and right on cue Don said we better get a move on with the couch.

When they had a hold of the thing, the three of them grabbing and reaching and pulling it out of the truck, Pike noticed Don had a back brace on . . . and that alone was odd, since Pike reminded himself that Don at this point should know that he's plenty strong, and by now Pike had heard enough stories from Dani, how Don's partner Otto had witnessed Don perform unusual feats but kept quiet about them.

Pike couldn't really picture any circumstance where he, himself, would be needing a back brace these days . . . and he couldn't resist asking Don about it.

"This?" Don said. "Preventative. My chiropractor, he insists that too much gardening can throw me out of alignment."

Chiropractor now, but not worth making a big deal out of . . . Meanwhile, the couch was a beast. The power quotient wasn't the issue obviously. If Pike cut it loose he could carry the thing up by himself, and he knew Don could too . . . but the bulk of the thing and specifically the protrusion angles of the arms were making it real tough in what was likely a 1960's hallway not designed for 21st century ridiculously overstuffed furniture.

What screwed them up was the turn halfway up, and the couch wedged into a kind of point of no return, where if you tried to *un-wedge* it too hard you

were probably going to break the hallway window . . . Or in the case of Pike--or Don--*muscling* it, they'd most likely be breaking the couch itself.

So there they were, analyzing the possibilities like 3 guys on one of those road crews where the one individual looks through that scope for a while and then stands back and someone takes notes on a clipboard and they all consult on what their next move is.

Don was starting to get a little jumpy, since he was getting real close to having to be at work, and was clearly a dependable employee. Meanwhile though, you could tell the guy *didn't* like to leave a job unfinished--especially where, in *his* mind, he contributed to the cause of the problem.

So Don had two hands on the front end, was sizing it up, and trying to slide it gingerly out of its predicament . . . and Mike on the back end was trying to help with the leverage . . . and Pike was in the middle and was pretending to help . . . but at the same thinking maybe this is how it's *supposed* to work *after* all.

Meaning . . . Don misses his shift as a result? Or gets there late and is assigned to another partner, and the housing project thing never happens?

Pike was thinking, that would be a first. Usually--if not always--this correction stuff works *against* you, throwing up roadblocks the *other* way--not *with* you. This was nuts.

Mike was saying now don't worry about it, it's my problem, I had no business dragging you fellas into this.

Don said, "Let's *us* be the judge of that, huh?"

And wow, a little edge to the guy. Pike could understand it. If they *didn't* get it--and Don had to take off for work leaving not only unfinished business but a massive obstacle right in the middle of someone's hallway--he wouldn't enjoy himself tonight, it wouldn't sit right.

Pike thought should I or shouldn't it, and bit the bullet and said to Don, "I see you keep looking at your watch . . . You know what? Why not call it *in* . . . wherever it is you *work* at?"

"It is the 4th of July," Mike said.

Pike said, "I mean, maybe you have *overtime* built up or something? *Vacation* days?'

"Can't *do* it," Don said, and he tried a different maneuver, from lower down on the couch. But that baby wasn't going anywhere at the moment. One added difficulty was that the hallway walls were coated with a thick stucco. So even if you didn't accidentally wrestle the arm off the couch, you still had to contend with scraping the *heck* out of the thing, and probably opening up the stuffing.

Which Mike was addressing, to not *worry* about that, let's just get it freed up. But Don wasn't that type, that wasn't going to fly.

Pike thought of the pizza place from earlier, and you figured if they opened up period on Independence Day that they'd still be open now . . . and he said, "I'm gonna . . . like grab something for us to eat. That sound okay?"

It was a stupid suggestion and Pike didn't expect a reaction, except Mike said, "You know something? That really sounds great. Here's a few bucks."

Pike said don't worry about it, and as he headed down the stairs Mike was telling Don it wouldn't be the worst thing to get a little something in our stomachs, recharge the batteries and we'll figure this out.

Pike ordered an extra large pizza with all the trimmings, and as he was waiting for it he wondered, should he commit a crime here and use his fake California ID to buy a 6-pack?

Pike was good about this--yes he had the ID like a lot of 18 year-olds probably did, but he never used it to buy alcohol, it was strictly to get into music and dance clubs where you had to be 21.

So there was a guilt factor as he grabbed the beer out of the cooler and put it on the counter--not to mention the *arrest* factor, if this didn't work.

He held his breath and the counter guy put the beer in a bag and set it aside, and when the pizza came out the place got busier and another guy rang him up and no one asked for ID.

Pike hustled back over there--you obviously wanted to stall Don as long as possible, but the flip-side, if you take *too* long he might go to work on you . . . so

it was fortunate he was still there, and he and Mike were sitting on the outside stoop now shooting the breeze, and Don did seem a little more relaxed.

You didn't want to jinx it bringing it up--had he called it in that he was taking the shift off--since that might re-direct his focus if he *hadn't*. It was 3:20 when Pike left the pizza place, so it had to be past 3:30 now, Don's normal departure time.

Either way . . . the plan was to embellish the meal with some booze, and relax everyone all around, and for Don to switch gears if he hadn't already and enjoy the 4th of July on his own friendly block like millions of other Americans.

They all dug into the pizza, and Mike polished off a beer pretty quick and was on his second one and said, "Donnie you need to join me here," and he opened one for Don and handed it to him.

Don said, "Thanks but no thanks, I'm good."

Mike considered this, and said, "Don are you on the wagon? I understand if you *are*, because I've *been* there."

This was getting strange, and Pike always mixed it up, the on and off--but he was pretty sure on the wagon meant a guy *wasn't* drinking . . . and you wondered about the underlying root of the thing, did that mean a person had a real *problem*, or just *currently* was holding back?

"I've been there too," Don said, and he lit a cigarette.

No one said anything for a couple minutes. Maybe it was just his imagination but Pike could sense a connection between these two guys, that they'd known each other before. Maybe not *literally* . . . but that Don at least had known a few 'Mikes' in his day, and probably one or two of them at AA meetings.

Just a guess.

Almost on cue Don picked up the bottle of beer and took a swig, and he said you're right, what could it *hurt*, if you're not going to partake on the 4th, when *are* you . . . and Mike smiled and seemed to relax, and he patted Don on the back, and he said where *were* we . . . referring to the story one or the other had been telling . . . and Pike was estimating it, that by now it'd be after 4 and Don sure didn't look like he was going anywhere tonight . . . and Pike quietly

headed back down Gliver Street, and neither Don or Mike seemed to notice, and when he got to the corner and looked back they hadn't moved.

Chapter 24

Piked went the other way from Roberts Avenue this time, which was mostly residential except for the 2-block strip where the pizza place and some other small businesses were. You also had the business park up there but that would be too modern.

It was 4 blocks to Nepperhan Avenue and that did have the right look, plenty of old brick buildings, reasonably spread out . . . and first was a public pool, indoor, and they'd had a holiday session today but it was ending at 5 and it seemed too tricky to contend with . . . and further along you had a supermarket, not a chain but a family-type one, and *that* building looked old, and Pike took a peak around the back but there were delivery guys fooling around back there, throwing a football.

The building up ahead said Con Edison Number 118a, and Pike wasn't sure what you had here, but it felt kind of government-industrial, and there was machinery humming and not much sign of human activity . . . and Pike tried a rear door but it was locked so he tried another one and it worked.

The steady buzz of the apparatus seemed to help, and Pike made a mental note to remember that in the future--if God forbid he had to keep *going* places--and Pike achieved the necessary state pretty quick . . . and he'd had success on the return trips, always crashing back in the vicinity of Beacon, so he didn't screw around any more, just focus on Hamilton High School and you won't go too far wrong . . . and boom . . . he ended up in Beacon okay, but this time at that gas station south of town where he'd run into the guy way back when, the uncle with the story about the San Francisco nephew . . .

Not important right now, the backstory, and Pike focused on Jeez, let me *out* of this mess . . . and he tried his phone and it worked--always a good sign

that you probably nailed the time frame--and Jack Hannamaker answered on the 2nd ring.

“Yeah man,” Jack said.

“First--and don’t give me a hard time here, just spit it out--what day we got?”

“Friday.” Pike was bracing for something sarcastic. Jack surprised you sometimes.

“What time?”

“2:48 at the moment. What’s your deal?”

Good. So the Yonkers business--putting it all together--the arrival in Pennsylvania, the railroad stuff, the Gliver Street effort--that consumed a little more than a day in Yonkers time . . . so we’re talking 2 hours here.

“My deal depends on *your* deal,” Pike said, and he was rambling, but what he was angling for, without having to explain himself, was could Jack pick him up.

“Well . . . Heidi and me, we’re on our way to Disneyland.”

“*Excuse* me?” Pike said, but yeah, unfortunately now he was picking up road noise out of Jack’s phone. It also made Pike nervous that Jack would be talking while he was driving, but Jack said, “You worry too much, she’s holding it *for* me.” And then you heard Jack say to Heidi, real buttery, “*Aren’t* you babe?”

And you could hear Heidi giggle and so forth . . . and wasn’t that *sweet* . . . the lovebirds on their way to LA.

Pike hung up anyway because he didn’t like people doing anything on the phone while they were behind the wheel, even if someone was assisting them.

Meanwhile that was that, and he called an Uber, and it took a while, and while he was waiting a 1960’s Ford Mustang came by at high speed and looked like it was racing a souped up 21st century Honda . . . and did something like that happen *before*, a *version* of it, last time Pike was stuck hanging around this old gas station?

He got home okay and went up and closed the door. Now you had a Friday night in front of you, the last one before school unfortunately started again on

Monday . . . and Pike knew what he was *supposed* to do, but he felt like anything *but* that, and he tried every which way to procrastinate.

You had Facebook and Instagram and some Twitter but you could only tolerate so much--it was good to be connected with everyone, a little news here and there, but you had too many people posting junk and looking for approval. Though Pike knew he was as guilty of that as anyone, it was admittedly fun to throw something out there and see who reacts.

He tried the TV, maybe settle in with some live sports, but it was all prelims, various roundtable discussions as intense as the White House situation room, all concerning the NFL playoff games this weekend.

Today was December 30th--and wow, New Year's Eve tomorrow, Pike hadn't even zeroed in on that--but we're talking 4 months and 26 days since Don. The housing project business--and the hopefully revised hanging around the Gliver Street neighborhood-*instead* business.

You could call Mitch, have him tell you what happened. That'd be one way.

The concern there, you'd might be opening up the *if the tree fell in the forest and no one heard it* can of worms.

In reverse.

If Pike was successful in Yonkers, Mitch in theory shouldn't have ever *known* about any transplant recipients, or any Erlene for that matter.

But if Pike asking triggered Mitch to check his database and his notes--what if something still registered there? Such as Mitch's record of the guy going crazy at the air show? . . . Would that then make it a *reality*? Or even a *partial* one?

Would the whole shebang be going *interdimensional* on you? . . . Whatever the heck that really meant . . .

Pike remembered Mr. Gillmore the astronomy teacher touching on this stuff. Most of it was over Pike's head--and what he *could* understand he had trouble buying into, it all seemed too way out there--but the fact was, it still didn't sound wise to *mess* with it, even if you didn't *believe* in it.

So no. No way to safely procrastinate by tracking down Mitch and letting him skip to the punch line.

Pike knew it was on him, wasn't it, always *his* deal, always up to him to find out . . .

So he turned on the computer. And as it was firing up he remembered a camp counselor from one summer when he was a little kid at the YMCA--rugged athletic guy who they all looked up to, but there was some big game on TV and the guy was rooting hard for one team, and he said halfway through he got too nervous and had to turn it off and find out what happened later.

This seemed extreme, but Pike could identify with it.

But forget all that . . . he took a long a look at the NY Daily News website, and you had the search icon dangling up top . . . and Pike entered July 5th, 1976 and held his breath.

He scoured the front page, flipped to the inside . . . the metro section, the national, the business, the sports . . . and not a thing about Don.

His heart was beating rapidly as he switched to the NY Post, went through the same procedure . . . and came up empty.

Then the Yonkers paper itself, whatever it was called, finding it now, the Herald Statesman . . . and it wasn't nearly as comprehensive as the major New York City papers but . . . it had enough relatively *unimportant* news in there, that you knew if something *important* happened on the night of July 4th it would definitely be *in* there . . . and zippo.

Pike stood up and felt like doing 100-mile an hour jumping jacks or something. *Wow* . . . He wished he could call someone, share this instant of monumental celebration. It was like a drug . . . He thought of Dani, but . . . if you were taking the cautious approach with *Mitch*, you needed to with Dani as well.

There was the one *down* element though, and Pike felt his throat tighten.

If you'd stopped Don from perishing, then the 5 people on the other end would still be waiting for transplants . . . and Pike didn't want to go there--you couldn't. He'd been through this before, and convinced himself for a hundred reasons that those transplants weren't meant to *be*, and they were faulty and

dangerous . . . and you prayed they would all get resolved with *correct* procedures . . . and meanwhile *Don* was alive again . . . and it hadn't been meant to be for *him* to get gunned *down*, either.

You couldn't torture yourself. The world--the worlds--were complicated. There was no script . . . You did the right thing.

Pike felt like something sweet, bad. You had to--celebrate was the wrong word--but break the stress somehow, and maybe there were baked Christmas something or others still hanging around in the kitchen . . . and he was halfway down the stairs when it hit him that . . . you know what? You better check the *next* day too.

So he trudged back up to his room and shut the door and went back on the computer.

The concern here was you never know, do you . . . That it being the 4th of July, maybe the news outlets gave most of the reporters the night off and were limited to skeletal staffs?

Taking it a step further--maybe a piece of news from the night of the 4th might not get picked up and sorted out and written up right away--and *unthinkably* now, Don's thing might have still happened, but not appeared in the *papers* until July 6th.

Pike cringed at the possibility--and it sure didn't seem likely that as significant and tragic a story as a police officer being killed on the job wouldn't make the next morning's news.

But you had to look, before you could completely relax. That was clear now.

So this time he reversed it and started with the Yonkers Herald Statesman. And there it was. From July 6th . . . Front *page*.

Slightly altered, but the same result.

Right in your face.

And Pike's heart slowed.

The headline read:

Veteran Off-Duty Yonkers Police Officer Killed In Saw Mill Car Crash

and the sub-heading read:

Parkway closed for 3 hours, Alcohol believed to be a factor

Pike turned off the computer and turned off the light and got in bed and covered his face.

A range of emotions were swirling around, and he couldn't help thinking about Heidi and the all-night drive and the Stephen King story.

That guy had figured it out *after* all, hadn't he.

You don't get away with trying to be a good guy and doing what you think is the right thing. *Do* you.

Something *else* happens, and odds are you're in worse shape then when you started, when you were stupid enough to try to be a hero.

And now you'd opened up a whole nother can of worms, hadn't you.

Bringing alcohol into the equation--to allegedly put the guy at *ease*, so he'd call in sick. What a brilliant idea that *was*.

Handing it to the poor guy on a silver platter, for Gosh sakes. Who it turns out just happens to be a recovering alcoholic.

Maybe before *you* showed up the guy'd been sober for *years*. *Probably* had in fact, for as long as he'd been on the force. Then you pair him up with Mike, who was ready, willing and able to take Don with him back down the wrong path.

Unreal . . .

Pike knew the Saw Mill without looking it up, that was the Saw Mill River Parkway, at the bottom of the hill from Don's neighborhood. Right across in fact from where Pike ducked into that utility building with the machinery, to come back home.

Pike knew the Saw Mill because when he'd mapped Don's route from Gliver Street to the precinct--getting a handle on how long it took him to get to work--that's how Don would drive it. The Saw Mill south a few miles to the Cross County Parkway, and whatever. . .

Pike lied still for a good while. It was a chilly night but he opened the window, and the cold air felt good. He thought back to simpler times, like last summer when a bunch of kids headed to Tahoe spur of the moment, and someone knew a swimming hole up near the summit, by Sugar Bowl, and there was an old-fashioned rope swing that extended way out there, and they wore the thing out, and they stopped in Grass Valley on the way back . . . and that turned into an all-night party. And the next day they all went back to Beacon like nothing happened, the radar always up for the next mini-adventure.

Simpler times indeed.

But not right now. Pike needed to reach out to someone, and the best he could come up, really by default, was Mitch.

Frankie was on the radar too, you could talk to the woman and she gave you her full attention and listened--but Mitch at this point, whether Pike admitted it or not, was like an uncle figure.

And yeah, sure--something might get thrown out of whack by talking to Mitch right now--the interdimensional type stuff Pike had been worried about--but let's face it, at this point how much *more* were you going to screw *up*?

Mitch sounded irritated when he answered, which did happen occasionally but wasn't real typical, and Pike said what's wrong, and Mitch said he and Lucy had a bit of an argument tonight. That she'd cooked dinner for the two of them and tried a new recipe for a stew, and there wasn't much flavor to it but Mitch kept insisting it was excellent, even helping himself to a big bowl of seconds--and she got miffed at him for pretending.

"Oh," Pike said, "So my deal--my news--you're putting on the back burner then."

"Not at all son," Mitch said, perking up considerably, and his voice getting louder on the phone, almost too loud.

“Okay, cutting through the smokescreen,” Pike said, “I tried to alter Don Pascarella’s thing . . . I gave it my best shot.” His voice broke.

“It’s okay Pike,” Mitch said.

Pike was crying, he hadn’t intended to, but now here it came, and he knew it was what you were supposed to do, let it *out*, nothing *wrong* with that, you weren’t less of a *man*, and so forth . . . but it still was tough to be breaking down in front of someone. Mitch, though, he was with you, he understood, and Pike lifted his t-shirt and wiped his face and said thanks, and hopefully that part was over.

“Let me look into it,” Mitch said. “But can you promise me something in the meantime?”

“What?”

“That you don’t think about it the rest of the night.”

Pike was getting himself reasonably back under control now. “Not even for one *second*?” he said, and he and Mitch both laughed as much as you could under the circumstances, which was about a half-second’s worth.

“You’ll be reachable?” Mitch said.

And Mitch wasn’t spelling it out, but Pike knew what this meant.

In case Mitch happens to find out that I made things worse than they already were.

Pike knew he shouldn’t have screwed around with this--and he also knew now that Mike Keegan guy, wherever the heck *he* came from, was a real bad omen.

Pike said yeah he’d be reachable . . . and that on the other business, the stew, *he* would have faked that it was good too.

“Yeah well, women,” Mitch said, and they hung up.

Chapter 25

The phone rang slightly after midnight, and of course Pike was wide awake, but it wasn't Mitch.

"I'm not disturbing you or anything, am I?" Hannamaker said.

"Affirmative," Pike said.

"I *am* then?" Jack said.

"Shut *up*. What do you need."

"Well me and Heidi, we decided to cool the jets."

"Oh."

"Unh-huh . . . The thing of it is now, I'm putting her on a plane in the morning, back to Phoenix . . . You know, rather than re-*drive* it and all."

"Hmm."

"Yeah. So . . . why I'm *calling* you, I told her I'd pay for it. The flight. On account of us, like . . ."

"Forcing her *into* it?" Pike said. "I thought she wanted to check out California, she was up for an adventure."

"And, that's sort of still the case, she's fine with sticking around."

"But you're *not*."

"Not at all. I mean, nice girl--*great* girl at times--but dang, I can't relate to her."

"Kind of tough," Pike said.

"And seeing as how, you know, we got school and all on Monday . . ."

Pike said, "Why are you *calling* me, dude?"

"Okay. I need some cash. To handle the rest of her flight."

"How much is it?"

“\$279. And that’s not bad at *all*, I checked around. John Wayne Airport in Orange County. You compare that to your LAX’s, Long Beach’s, we’re *way* under. The reason we got a good deal, it’s the early flight. 5:30 am.”

“Ooh boy.” That sure didn’t *sound* like a particularly good deal, and Pike wondered if the 5:30 am angle was so Hannamaker could minimize any more time spent with Heidi . . . Whatever.

“I know,” Jack said. “So listen, can you help me out with 2 hundred bucks?”

“*Dog*, man,” Pike said, “what do think I *am*, here?”

There was a pause and Jack said, “That’s what I figured. Don’t worry about it, I thought I’d just check. We’ll work it out.”

That essentially wrapped up the conversation but right before Jack clicked off Pike heard himself, say, “Okay let me see what I can do,” and Jack came alive and started going on that you saved the day, you don’t *know*, and I won’t *forget* this.

The truth was Pike didn’t *know* what he could do. He looked in his wallet. By staying on that train and avoiding a motel--and kind of dodging the conductor on the way back as well--he’d saved a few bucks. On the other hand the original \$76 train from Lancaster and the reckless splurging in the dining car, and then the pizza and pasta, and then the fateful return for more . . . take-out this time, which included the unfortunate 6-pack . . . the instigator . . . that threw Don off the wagon, and was the beginning of the end for the poor guy.

Bottom line, of the \$200 Pike started off with he had a grand total of \$48 and change--and there was the monster sum of \$12 that he’d left in his cash machine account for just in case.

So you needed \$150, and it was 1 in the morning.

A few thoughts swirled around, and they were all bad ideas. Finally he thought of something, trying to hock some baseball cards to the 7-11 guy. The 7-11 out by the fairgrounds was open round the clock and it was manned by an Indian family, very nice folks, and one relative or another was always working the register.

So Pike grabbed his collection and drove out there. The reason it might work, is even though it was a typical convenience store, they had set aside a little area with a flat glass showcase where they sold cards and some sports collectibles. You rarely if ever saw anyone paying a lot of attention, but one of the owners one time told Pike it was a hobby and he enjoyed it.

That guy wasn't there tonight, and it was a younger guy working the register unfortunately, and he didn't look Indian, and Pike figured that's the end of that idea. He assumed they only had family members working the place, that that was key to their profit margin, but apparently not, this late . . . and you couldn't blame them, the night shift was no doubt dicey.

Pike asked the register person anyway, were they interested in buying some cards, and the guy politely said he didn't know anything about that, and you'd have to speak to Mr. Kumar in the morning.

That made sense and Pike thanked the guy and figured while he was here let me get something sweet after *all*, and he was studying the Hostess cup cakes and Twinkies section when a new guy asked him what cards he was selling.

Pike looked up and the guy had a uniform shirt on and it was the Coca Cola route man, and his truck had been parked outside. Pike showed him what he had, said he didn't know a lot about them but he was trying to raise \$150 bucks.

The man knew his stuff, you could tell, and he went right to two of them, and then found 5 or 6 more, all from the 1970's and 80's, and asked Pike what he wanted for them.

"You tell me, honestly," Pike said, "I have no idea."

And it was apparent that the Coke guy was a fair man and he pulled out his phone and went onto some baseball collectibles valuation site, and it looked pretty dang legit, and the guy showed Pike where the cards were listed and the estimated values--and bottom line they agreed on 50 percent of that, which rounded off to a hundred bucks, and Pike said you sure don't want any others, to get up to \$150, and the guy said sorry but no, he was a Red Sox fan and he's sticking with those.

Just for the heck of it Pike said to the counter guy, “You got any suggestions how I can pick up a quick 50 dollars?”

“Not sure,” the guy said, “you got anything in your pick-up?”

Pike didn't think so but he went out there and took a look--the glove compartment, under the seats, and finally *behind* he seats, where he found a few things he wouldn't have remembered being there, and he brought them in.

There was a Trucker's Atlas, and for whatever reason the guy was interested in that, and there was one of those tools--kind of dangerous actually, you had to be careful--but where you can smash your window open if God forbid you plunged off a bridge or something and the vehicle got submerged. There was a Carhart jacket, not bad shape, but always a little tight on Pike--and the guy said he'd be good for the \$50 for those items, as long as Pike gave him a ride home--seeing as how some idiot sideswiped him and his car was in the shop.

This was becoming the Twilight Zone and Pike was tempted to ask him how he planned to get home *otherwise*, before Pike happened to show up, but it wasn't worth it . . . and Pike had to admit *he* was a bit like poor Don, in that when he *started* a job--no matter how stupid, even something involving *Hannamaker*--he didn't feel right letting it go.

So Pike asked the register person when did he need that ride, and the guy said at 4, when he got off, and Pike said fine, and you weren't going to expect the guy to pay you until then . . . so Pike went back home, brutally tried to kill a couple hours since now he *was* ready to fall asleep, showed up back at the 7-11 and the guy was good to his word and forked over the \$50.

Pike drew the extra \$12 out of his cash machine account, thereby draining it, and he used it to pay the 7-11 money transfer--something called Pay Near Me--and he texted Jack to pick up the \$200 at a 7-11 down *there*, and good luck.

Mitch of course calls in the middle of driving the counter person home, and Pike ignored it, but after he dropped the guy he pulled into a parking lot and called him back.

Chapter 26

“All right, are you ready,” Mitch said.

“That sounded like more of a statement than a question,” Pike said.

“Okay then . . . The accident on the parkway, *that* occurred on Tuesday, July 5th. You were there--apparently--on a Monday.”

Pike was thinking, are you for *real*. Number 1, I know I *was* there, and Number 2 I know *when* I was there.

Pike admitted he hadn't clarified the Tuesday part, or if he had, he hadn't dwelled on it. What *difference* did it make, if you turn someone back into an alcoholic and they wrap their car around a tree on a *Monday* or on a *Tuesday*.

Mitch said, “What I'm getting to son, we're good.”

You wanted to blurt out a couple things--Don't *mess* with me man, this isn't the *time*--being the main one . . . but all Pike could come up with was, “Hmm.”

There was a pause. “You're not with me, I can tell,” Mitch said.

Pike didn't say anything, and Mitch said, “Go back and re-read the article. The one you pointed me to.”

Pike told Mitch to hold on and dialed up the Yonkers Herald Statesman again, from July 6th.

You had the same headline, and fine, Pike hadn't read it all the way through, because why bother with the unnecessary details, the headline said all you need to know.

He expanded the article this time.

Veteran Off-Duty Yonkers Police Officer Killed In Saw Mill Car Crash

by Robert Treadwell, for the Herald Statesman

July 6, 2016--Yonkers PD mourned the tragic loss of an officer today, as investigators tried to piece together the circumstances surrounding a single-vehicle crash on the side of the Saw Mill River Parkway Tuesday.

Veteran patrolman Randall S. Guerazzi, 38, was killed at approximately 1:15 in the afternoon when his southbound late model Ford Explorer struck an embankment approximately an eighth of a mile below the Wardell Avenue exit.

Witnesses reported seeing the vehicle swerving before the crash. Investigators suspect alcohol was a factor. Toxicology tests are pending.

Guerazzi was a Yonkers native and an avid outdoorsman. He graduated from Gorton High School in 2007. He joined the Yonkers Police Department in 2009. Guerazzi received multiple commendations, including in an off duty role in 2012 when he was credited with talking down a potential suicide jumper on the Tappan Zee Bridge.

“Are you there?” Mitch said after a couple minutes. “Anybody home?”

“I’m here,” Pike said finally. “But I’m not.”

“But you read it, right?”

“I did, and I’m . . . I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Mitch said.

“Does this mean--I mean Jeeminy Freaking Christmas--I . . . somehow stopped *Don* . . . and killed *another* guy?”

Mitch said, “You did good kid. You stopped Don . . . and Mr. Guerrazzi--sadly that happened *anyway*.”

“You got to be kidding me,” Pike said. His mind was whirling, and he remembered again reading the online news before he traveled back there, and he

was pretty positive he checked it as far forward as the 7th or 8th, and it was all Don, and the aftermath--no mention of *this* guy. You would have remembered something like that for sure.

Mitch said, "I know what you're thinking, and I was there too. But a little googling--and a search engine that rolls back websites, which was somewhat hit or miss, I'll admit . . . Suffice it to say that Officer Guerazzi—*before* you made your visit back there--unfortunately had indeed perished. On July 12th. A week later. A different roadway but in similar fashion."

Pike felt himself tearing up all over again. "So what you're telling me . . . I didn't *cause* it then." He *knew* now what Mitch was telling him, but it felt awful good to say it out loud.

"You did not. The only side effect of your visit--so far as I can determine--is it pushed that officer's tragedy forward slightly."

Pike said, "And *Don* . . . he still, you know . . . going to work like normal? . . . And all the rest of it?"

"Everything seems fine," Mitch said. "We'll keep an eye out of course. We always do."

"Wow," Pike said.

"Get some sleep now," Mitch said. "Some of the real stuff."

Chapter 27

“If I told you only *half* of how weird it got with that chick, you wouldn’t believe me,” Jack said. “Everyone else has a nice simple Christmas *break*, and I get put on a roller coaster.”

“It can work that way,” Pike said.

They were in The Box, lounging around on Sunday afternoon, New Year’s Day actually, but that part was kind of dulled, with school unfortunately starting tomorrow--the silver lining being they were in the home stretch, you could see the finish line, and barring any outrageous unforeseen circumstance, they’d be graduating in June.

“Yeah well, what are you going to do,” Jack said.

Pike said, “You remember an Audrey Milburn?”

“Dude, you keep *asking* me that. What’s your problem?”

Pike had heard somewhere that one of the tools therapists used on people--a *sneaky* tool--was to keep asking the same questions over and over. The concept being, you make the person search deeper down than maybe their conscious level is aware of, and who knows, they might spit something new out on the third or fourth try . . . Even the getting ticked *off* part, that might *jar* something . . . like Jack was at the moment.

“If I told you,” Pike said, “you used to date her. And one time, in the middle of it, we had an altercation at the water fountain . . . That’d be you and me.”

Jack said, “Really. What was it about?”

“I can’t remember exactly,” Pike said, which at this point was true. “But then I stole her away from you . . . while you were in the hospital getting an injury repaired, and you didn’t know what was going on.”

“Gillette?” Jack said.

“Yeah.”

“You should write comic books. You have a fertile imagination.”

“And then she moved away,” Pike continued. “The whole family did . . . Nothing to do with *us*, exactly.”

“So, la-di-da,” Jack said.

“Anyways . . . I found her in Kansas. Or I should say, someone helped me.’

“So call her *up*.”

Pike took a moment. “I’ve *thought* about it. Been tossing it around . . . I’m more inclined to, like, maybe show up in *person*. Briefly. See what’s *up*.”

Jack was staring into space now, and Pike wondered, *was* the guy actually pulling something up from deep down in the recesses?

Jack said, “She change her *name* then? This person? When she moved away?”

“Yes she did.”

“Well what is it?”

“I’m going to leave it at that,” Pike said, “for now.”

“You’re an idiot,” Jack said. “But if you ever do head out that way-- Kansas--I guess let me know. I might come along for the ride.”

“Really,” Pike said. “Now why would *that* be?”

Jack was back to normal. “You know something? Why not make yourself useful, and go upstairs and bring us something to eat.”

Pike said, “You like to boss people around. That the trouble, eventually, with Heidi?”

“Thank God I got out of *that* one.”

“Kind of a, *be careful what you wish for* type deal then?” Pike said.

“Ah, man,” Jack said.

The End

If you'd like to be notified of new releases in this series, and occasional free stuff, please join the Rex Bolt Newsletter.

The Pike Gillette Series:

Time Control, Book 1

Time Lapse, Book 2

Time Games, Book 3

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